

Paisley Burns Club Annual Dinner

Normandy Hotel, Renfrew

25th January 2020

The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns

Proposed by the President, David C. Davidson

*Hale be your heart! hale be your fiddle!
Lang may your elbuck, jink and diddle,
To cheer you through the weary widdle
O' this wild warl'.
Until you on a crummock driddle,
A grey hair'd carl.*

*Come wealth, come poortith, late or soon,
Heaven send your heart-strings aye in tune,
And screw your temper-pins aboon
A fifth or mair
The melancholious, lazy croon
O' cankerie care.*

*May still your life from day to day,
Nae "lente largo" in the play,
But "allegretto forte" gay,
Harmonious flow,
A sweeping, kindling, bauld strathspey-
Encore! Bravo! ¹*

My Fellow Members and our Honoured Guests

Amongst the many traditions – some would say peculiarities - of Paisley Burns Club, is the fiddling in of the haggis. If we are not unique in this practice, we are certainly unusual. If, like me, you have attended Burns Suppers elsewhere, you will think that piping in the haggis is the standard from which we, being of an awkward nature, choose to differ.

. And yet Gentlemen, surely the bagpipes are an instrument of war and hardly consistent with the conviviality of our celebratory gathering and then there's the Health and Safety consideration shouldn't pipers playing in enclosed spaces have health warnings and advisory notices about the wearing of ear defenders? Please don't misunderstand me. I enjoy listening to pipe music when it's played in a field or from a distant hilltop!

Robert Burns was born and brought up in Lowland Ayrshire where the symbols of Gaelic culture – dress, music and weaponry – would have been considered to belong to a different, if not alien culture. In the aftermath of the defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden, such were the violent reprisals and determination to suppress features of traditional Gaelic society that it is likely that Lowland folk would have been glad not to be viewed as sympathisers, never mind collaborators with the Jacobite cause. Yet in London, much anti-Scottish propaganda depicted all Scots as Highlanders and promoted the negative stereotype of an impoverished and uncivilised people: “the Highland garb is a dress fit only for war, theft and idleness” read a comment on the draft of the Disarming Act.

It is as remarkable as it was inevitable that Scotland - its people and its culture - would not be forever sublimated. Like a flowering shrub that has been pruned back hard so, from the mid-eighteenth to the later-nineteenth century, there was a reinvigoration of creativity in Scotland and a flourishing of human expression as no other. Duncan Macmillan, the art historian, describes this era as “the period of most striking originality in Scottish art coinciding with that of the most widespread interest in Scottish traditions in music and poetry”.ⁱⁱ

Last year, many of you would have visited the exhibition at Scotland’s National Museum entitled “Wild and Majestic: Romantic Visions of Scotland.”ⁱⁱⁱ It described what it called “Scotland’s emergence into the global imagination during the Romantic era” and how “Romanticism responded to the majesty of place, the power of the elements, and evocations of a stirring, mysterious past” – all of which Scotland offered in spades.

Specific emphasis was given to the inspirational effect that Scottish literature had on “numerous European composers, whose music contributed in turn to the artistic and popular fascination with [Scotland] and its history.” In this regard, it cited “James Macpherson’s Ossian verse, the poems and novels of Sir Walter Scott, [the music of Felix Mendelssohn and, of course,] the poetry and song of Robert Burns.”

This imagined Scotland was the “Land of the Mountain and the Flood”, surveyed by the “Monarch of the Glen:”

*“From scenes like these, old Scotia’s grandeur springs,
That makes her lov’d at home, rever’d abroad”^{iv}*

These last lines of course are from “The Cotter's Saturday Night” - a poem written in the year before Burns’s arrival in Edinburgh – a poem that appealed to the sentimentality of the intellectuals of that “Athens” – a poem that contributed to Burns’s being cast as the “heav’n-taught ploughman” – and in turn being characterised in what Carol McGuirk describes as his “demeaningly rustic image [. . . .] that denies the skill and sophistication of his finest works”.^v Of course Burns himself as the author of the poem was complicitous in creating that image.

In his essay, “The Cotter’s Kailyard,”^{vi} Andrew Nash cites Paisley’s own John Wilson (in his ‘non-Christopher North’ guise) as the author of a highly influential essay entitled “The Genius and Character of Robert Burns.” Initially written in 1819, this was more widely published in the 1840s and described at the 1859 Centenary celebrations in Paisley as “incomparably the best” memoir of Burns. In it, Wilson professes: “unquestionably, in ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night,’ we feel that we are reading the records of a purer, simpler, more pious race; and there is in that immortal poem a depth of domestic joy – an intensity

of the feeling at home – a presiding spirit of love – and a lofty enthusiasm of religion, which are all peculiarly Scottish, and beyond the pitch of mind of any other people.”

Later Wilson attests: [Burns] “might have done far more good than he has done [. . .] had he delighted less in painting the corruptions of religion, than in delineating her native and indestructible beauty. ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’ shews what he could have done [. . .] had he surveyed, with a calm and untroubled eye, all the influences of our religion, carried as they are into the inmost heart of society by our simple and beautiful forms of worship.”

What sanctimonious, over-pious claptrap?!! I like to think that other sons of Paisley at that time – our forebears who were members of Paisley Burns Club, the oldest constituted Burns Club in the world – had a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the man whose life and work we celebrate this evening.

Wilson’s portrayal, along with many reminiscences and works of popular fiction, gorged the hungry monster of denial and nostalgic desire for some romanticised past. It obscured in an idyllic fog the realities of a nation gripped in the rapid social and economic revolution associated with industrialisation.

Burns, for many, personified Scotland. In George Gilfillan’s 1879 edition of his works, Burns was hailed as “the greatest National Poet that ever lived [. . .] a living image of his country [. . .] a microcosm of his nation”^{vii} but that nation existed only in romantic imagination and the distortion was therefore as much of the man as of his country. I said earlier that Burns was complicitous in creating this sentimentalised image. You might say that he “played to the gallery.” His life and character are filled with such complexity and the contradictions typified in the many voices of Robert Burns.

“But what does all that have to do with Burns and the Fiddle?”, I imagine you’re asking. Let me take you back to reality and to Burns in his formative years. At home on the farm at Lochlea, when his beleaguered father was facing ruin, Robert, in a mood of escapism, famously “to give his manners a brush, went to a country dancing school.”^{viii} This, he later recalled, set him at odds with his father: “My father had an unaccountable antipathy against these meetings; and my going was, what to this hour I repent, in absolute defiance of his commands.”

I find this episode troubling. Here, at Paisley Burns Club’s Annual Dinner, I am not alone in bringing my father as a guest. Other members have brought brothers and sons and some have followed their fathers as members. I think of this as one of the many happy features of our club, reflecting the best of family values. So, what of Burns’s “defiance?”

In this case, I’m going to side with the boy. William Gregg, the dancing teacher, was typical of his profession in that he taught dance steps rather than style. He taught etiquette and protocol, the “manners” required to conduct oneself in polite company. Surely these were accomplishments that would be desirable? I think Robert’s father might have been a little sanctimonious in his objections. We’re not talking knife crime and cocaine here! In his defence, I would say that as a parent he at least had a right to offer guidance to his son in matters of conduct – unlike the aforementioned Professor John Wilson.

Members of Paisley Burns Club know that I rarely miss an opportunity to introduce some ancestor or another in a paper that I present. Indulge me as I continue that tradition by

mentioning that Gregg's method of dance instruction – teaching steps while playing the tune on his fiddle – continued within living memory. My mother's grandfather was such a teacher.^{ix} Although it is nearly eighty years since he died, he lived in an era that has afforded me the inheritance of recordings of his playing and also a film from the mid-1930s of his taking a dance class at the Scottish Country Dance Society's Summer School at St Andrews. I have great admiration for Stewart's playing while perambulating between the tables ahead of our haggis, but I think, were he to view the film, that he would acknowledge that even his skills were trumped. My great grandfather, in highland dress, not only plays his fiddle while simultaneously dancing to demonstrate the steps, but does so both facing and then with his back to the class, switching his leading foot as he does so to mirror the steps accordingly. This seems to me to be a breath-taking display of coordination but then, to my shame and regret, neither playing the fiddle nor dancing have formed any part of my legacy or accomplishments.

Burns's brother Gilbert viewed Robert's attendance at dancing classes, in one respect at least, like their father: as an act of rebellion. Robert Crawford in his biography "The Bard"^x feels that Burns is at this stage of his life endeavouring to establish his own identity, specifically one that is different from his father, and that his passion for dancing "might even give him a dash of attractiveness" that would assist him in realising his eager ambitions for sexual experience. While we have some reason to believe that he was successful in the latter pursuit, it is less certain how capable a dancer Burns proved to be. His habitus seems to have been that of a sturdily-built ploughman and while he might have been proficient enough at his dance steps to hop over the clods of dirt in a field, it is hard not to imagine him on a dance floor as something of a clodhopper!

It was around this time, and with the village of Tarbolton acting as his social hub, that Burns became interested in Freemasonry, becoming a Mason there in 1781. The village also afforded opportunity to "meet girls away from family and immediate neighbours." Here too existed "a lively oral culture, not just of song and chat but also of verse-making." Having formed the 'Bachelors Club' along with half a dozen others and with the ingredients of dancing, drink, sex and banter becoming an established part of his life, Burns was clearly having fun!

Traditional Scots songs had formed part of the aural backdrop to Burns's early life at home. Betty Davidson – no relation this time! – was the widow of his mother's cousin and regularly helped in the running of his childhood home. She had, Burns supposed, "the largest collection in the county of tales and songs."^{xi} Then at Tarbolton, his friend and fellow aspiring poet David Sillar, was an able fiddler with a liking for Scots songs. Burns's youngest sister recalled how her brother, following Sillar's example, bought himself a fiddle but was "no great proficient." It is said that he could only manage to play a few slow airs and strathspeys and somewhat deliberately at that, but that he had a good 'inner ear' and an understanding of the compass and versatility of the instrument.

Whatever his standard of playing, Burns was not reserved in describing himself as a fellow fiddler in correspondence with others. His lines:

*"Hale be your heart! hale be your fiddle!
Lang may your elbuck jink and diddle,"*^{xii}

first appeared in a letter to Davie Sillar and then reappeared in his subsequent “Epistle to Major William Logan”^{xiii} from which I read at the opening of my address. Major Logan was a retired military officer of Parkhouse near Ayr and an excellent fiddler.

Burns loved music, song and dance. In a letter to Elizabeth Scott whom he visited while in the Borders, he wrote of his aspirations:

*“I Mind it weel in early date,
When I was bardless, young, and blate,
An' first could thresh the barn,
Or hand a yokin at the plough;
An' tho' fu foughten sair enough,
Yet unco proud to learn.*

*Ev'n then, a wish, (I mind its power),
A wish, that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breest;
That I for poor auld Scotland's sake
Some usefu' plan or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least.”^{xiv}*

Another of my favourite traditions of Paisley Burns Club is to embark each summer on a day's outing. In recent years, we have visited some of the stopping-off points of Burns while on his tours of the Highlands and Lowlands. Particularly memorable to me was a visit to Dunkeld where the renowned fiddler and aficionado of Niel Gow, Pete Clark, engrossed us with a recital of Scots fiddle tunes.

Burns set out from Edinburgh on his Highland tour in August 1787. As Nigel Leask in the new Oxford Edition^{xv} describes, “the financial success of Burns's [recently published] Edinburgh ‘Poems’, made the prospect of a domestic tour, more often the prerogative of Britain's landed gentry or affluent merchant class, viable.” Burns knew that sooner or later he would have to return to farming but this was his opportunity to capitalize on his celebrity and fulfil the ambitions that he had expressed in a letter to the Earl of Buchan: “I wish for nothing more than to make a leisurely Pilgrimage through my native country; to sit and muse on those once hard-contended fields where Caledonia, rejoicing, saw her bloody lion borne through broken ranks to victory and fame; and catching the inspiration, to pour the deathless Names in Song”.^{xvi}

Beyond seeking such poetic inspiration, Burns was by this time active in collecting songs for James Johnson's ‘Scots Musical Museum,’ which, along with the songs contributed to George Thomson (and of course ‘Tam o' Shanter’), represent the major creative achievements of his later years. The tour brought him into contact with some of the leading song collectors, performers, and traditional musicians of eighteenth-century Scotland – fiddlers and composers such as Niel Gow, a distinguished exponent of the strathspeys and reels that transformed the Scottish fiddle repertoire and in particular blended the Gaelic and Lowland musical styles. Deliberately or not, that blurring of two once-distinct cultures was a further element in developing the romanticised image of a Scotland of which, as I have already said, Burns was the perceived embodiment. “Many of the lyrics and melodies subsequently published by Johnson and Thomson, from both Gaelic and Lowland tradition, either were collected on the Highland Tour, or evoked people and places that Burns had personally encountered [along the way].”^{xvii}

Under the influence of the burgeoning Romantic movement in art, literature and music, along with a fascination for dramatic landscape and the heroic warrior tradition in its history, the Scotland of Burns's time was becoming a tourist destination. Fifteen years before Burns's excursion, a London periodical had observed that "It is now become fashionable among the English to make a tour into Scotland for some weeks or months." The increasingly well-trodden path was followed then and into the first decades of the nineteenth-century by English and Europeans alike. Royal approval, implicit in Victoria and Albert choosing their Highland retreat at Balmoral, and the advent of railways as a means of transport, combined to stimulate an even greater surge of popularity. Again, however unwittingly, Burns was complicit in driving this tourist boom.

As I have mentioned, Burns used his Highland Tour to collect songs for James Johnson's 'Scots Musical Museum.' He described the undertaking in a letter: "An Engraver, James Johnson, in Edinburgh has, not from mercenary views but from an honest Scotch enthusiasm, set about collecting all our native Songs and setting them to music; particularly those that have never been set before. Clarke, the well known Musician presides over the musical arrangement; and Drs Beattie and Blacklock, Mr Tytler, and your humble servant to the utmost of his small power, assist in collecting the old poetry, or sometimes for a fine air to make a stanza, when it has no words." ^{xviii}

Burns's enthusiasm for Scots song had, as I have described, its origins in his earliest years and his letters are a fine source of evidence about his knowledge of existing and contemporary fiddle tunes. He came to own some collections of fiddle music and had access to more. His method of song-writing was first to familiarise himself with the melody and only then to set words to it.

Burns's letters to both Johnson, and later to George Thomson, frequently discuss the use of fiddle tunes for songs and the qualities of these tunes in detail. Later editions of the songs, especially those by James Dick in 1903 and Kinsley in the 1960s, trace many of these tunes to contemporary collections by famous fiddlers including Niel Gow. Burns's good friend Robert Riddell of Glenriddell was a keen amateur musician who published his own collection of 'New Music for the Pianoforte or Harpsichord.' By having the use of Glenriddell's library at neighbouring Friars' Carse during his Ellisland years, Burns had ready access to a number of these printed collections.

In its first full scholarly edition, researched at Glasgow University's Centre for Robert Burns Studies and published as part of the 'Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century' project, Murray Pittock suggests that the 'Scots Musical Museum,' constitutes "the underpinning canonical text of Scottish song." ^{xix} The six-volume collection was produced by Johnson between 1787 and 1803, and, except for the first and last volumes, Burns was its *de facto* editor in addition to having an authorial role throughout. The number of songs that should be attributed to Burns is contentious. They are categorised in this edition ranging from songs wholly by Burns with no prior antecedents, to songs at most only lightly edited by him. Of the 600 or so songs in the collection, about 200 are wholly claimed for Burns but as Pittock recognises, "Burns's editorial role and his authorial role are inseparable . . . [He] had a dominant role in the creation of two-thirds of the *Museum*, and an input into the rest." ^{xx}

Certainly both Johnson and Thomson sought Burns's skill in what they called "mending" songs. This may have entailed writing entirely original verses, or little more than making

one or two minor word or punctuation changes. In either extreme, the song could be said to have been improved by Burns or, to use modern terminology, upcycled.

That many more Scots songs have been wrongly attributed to Burns in the past reflects his standing and regard as Scotland's National Bard. Just as he was the perceived embodiment of Scotland, so Scots songs were often presumed to be Burns songs. His fame was such that associating his name with any work gave it a cachet and of course increased its commercial value. The brand "Robert Burns" was highly bankable and ruthlessly exploited. It still is!

In consequence, as Murray Pittock describes: "Burns is held to have written songs he may have collected, to have collected songs he may have written, and to be indulged for his persistent editing of songs by the assumption that if he did rewrite them, his was the best version and the means of his 'magic touch' justified all ends." ^{xxi}

Gentlemen, before concluding, let me mention one further tradition of Paisley Burns Club that I value perhaps above all others. It is that we gather together in our monthly meetings and especially at this, our Anniversary Celebration, in friendship and with a spirit of conviviality. Among the happiest elements of this evening is our shared enjoyment of the songs of Burns. It would be invidious of me to mention our soloists or our ensemble of songsters but what I can appreciate is the pleasure that our whole company – "principally yourselves" – takes in singing these songs.

In conclusion, I have argued that we are a product of post-Jacobite, romantic, foreign and largely aristocratic imagination; ideas mediated through art, literature, song and dance - Ossian, Scott, Burns, Johnson & Thomson, Mendelssohn, and the rest – a hybridisation of Highland Gaelic and Lowland cultures, exemplified not least by our individual choice of attire. Stylized Highland dress and clan tartans worn by Lowlanders may once have raised eyebrows or even faced ridicule as when a tartan-wearing population turned out to greet the King at Sir Walter Scott's stage-managed visit to Edinburgh of George IV in 1822. After the passage of two centuries and as I survey my fellow members and our guests seated before me, I find myself completely reconciled to what we are become. I embrace and glory in our hybrid origins: gentlemen, you look magnificent!

I have tried to show that music meant a great deal to Burns, as it does to me and as it does to the members and friends of Paisley Burns Club.

I have tried to show that Burns's appreciation of music was steeped in the Scots Fiddle tradition, and as such, was the motivating influence on his genius for song-making.

I have tried to show the genius of a man whose legacy in song and verse and whose complexity of character transcend all the exploitation and misappropriation levelled at him during and since his lifetime.

Gentlemen! Please be upstanding and join me in raising your glasses to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.

David C. Davidson
Paisley
25th January 2020

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- ⁱ From “Epistle to Major Logan” (30th October 1786)
- ⁱⁱ Duncan Macmillan: “Old and Plain: Music and Song in Scottish Art” (1991)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Patrick Watt & Rosie Waine: “Wild and Majestic; Romantic Visions of Scotland” (2019)
- ^{iv} From “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” (Winter 1785-6)
- ^v Carol McGuirk “Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era” (1997)
- ^{vi} From “Robert Burns and Cultural Authority” ed. Robert Crawford (1997)
- ^{vii} George Gilfillan “Life of Burns” in *The National Burns* (1879)
- ^{viii} From “autobiographical” letter to Dr John Moore (2nd August 1787)
- ^{ix} John “Dancie” Reid of Newtyle (1869-1942)
- ^x Robert Crawford “The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography” (2009)
- ^{xi} From “autobiographical” letter to Dr John Moore (2nd August 1787)
- ^{xii} From “Second Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet” (?July 1786)
- ^{xiii} From “Epistle to Major Logan” (30th October 1786)
- ^{xiv} From “To the Guidwife of Wauchope House” (March 1787)
- ^{xv} “The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns” Vol. I ed. Nigel Leask (2014)
- ^{xvi} From letter to David Erskine, Earl of Buchan (7th February 1787)
- ^{xvii} “The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns” Vol. I ed. Nigel Leask (2014)
- ^{xviii} From letter to James Hoy (20th October 1787)
- ^{xix} “The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns” Vol. II ed. Murray Pittock (2018)
- ^{xx} “The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns” Vol. II ed. Murray Pittock (2018)
- ^{xxi} “The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns” Vol. II ed. Murray Pittock (2018)