

Gentlemen,

As your President it gives me great pleasure this evening to propose the Toast to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns on this the 203rd year of our Club's foundation.

For a mathematician, with little inherent Musical or Literary knowledge, the Presidential year, as many here will know, is an experience which forces one to take on board the challenges of Robert Burns, to read more deeply into the man and to appreciate the many factors and people which influenced his opinions and writing, either directly or indirectly. It is a year when the President often leaves Office more knowledgeable than when he arrived in the Chair.

Normally on such occasions the Immortal Memory proposed by the President is personal to **His** interests, there are no **Hers** in Paisley Burns Club, but you will be pleased to know this evening that Education will not figure greatly in this peroration. What little I know about Burns I know less about Education.

Two weeks ago I was in Boston visiting my daughter. Boston I find one of the few cities in the USA with any history and the Freedom Trail in Boston is a historical goldmine as one follows in the footsteps of the great revolutionary figures of Paul Revere, John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, all of whom feature greatly in the poetry of Robert Burns.

Hence this evening I wish to combine 2 interests of mine since childhood, History and Politics.

As a young man I grew up in a household where both of these topics featured greatly in the family conversation. At a time when very few people had television, the art of conversation was alive and well, just like Burns' childhood in Alloway, but regrettably unlike many households today. I also remember as a boy staying with my Grandparents, lighting the Tilley paraffin lamps at night, toasting bread in front of a coal fire while a plaque depicting a scene from a Cotters Saturday hung on the wall.

That however was the past.

Gentlemen for those with similar interests to myself you will know we live in fascinating times. A puritanical Scots Prime Minister is pitted against a young and confident Tory opponent where a command of English language and a sharpness of mind are the main tools of adversity

Who will win through in all these plots and sub-plots remains to be seen, but, I ask you, were things greatly different over 200 years ago in Burns' time.

Then the large brooding and corpulent figure of Lord North, the then Tory Prime Minister who had just lost the American Colonies and coincidentally enough had also previously been Chancellor of the Exchequer, was in verbal conflict with the young upstart William Pitt, then aged 23 who while nominally also a Tory, preferred to be known as an Independent Whig.

At that time Burns greatly admired Pitt and his reforming credentials and support for the American Colonists and in the Kilmarnock Edition of 1786 the poem "A Dream" describes Prime Minister Pitt as a "A true guid Fallow's get, A name not envy spairges".

Parliament was also inhabited by other giants such as Charles Fox, who Burns then described in The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer of 1785 as "Yon ill tongu'd tinker Charlie Fox".

Later in life as Pitt became more fearful of the excesses of the French Revolution and accordingly less reforming, Burns' attitude towards him changed and Fox came more into favour with Burns. In the poem of 1789 entitled "Sketch entitled to the Rt Hon Ch. J. Fox" Fox is then described as "My much honoured Patron" while Pitt is the villain of the peace. "a pushing wardly fellow".

Edmund Burke was also to be found in Parliament at that period opposing the Government's action on the Americas and urging compromise and calling for the Reform of the East India Company. Burke, however, is possibly better known for his opposition to the French Revolution through his work "Reflections on the Revolution in France", published in 1791 which sold over 30,000 copies. This work, apparently against an individual's liberty, provoked such an outcry in many sections of society that it resulted in such works as Thomas Paine's "The Rights of Man" which sold over 200,000 copies.

In 1793 the Paisley Poet Alexander Wilson commented in his Address to the Synod of Glasgow that "The Rights of Man" is now weel kenned and red by mony a hunder" and of course this was followed by Burns penning the poem "The Rights of Women" in 1792.

The scheming Dundas, whom Burns almost met during his Highland Tour at Blair Atholl, was also in Parliament at that time though it is very unlikely, if they had dined together at Blair Atholl, they would have had much in common. In 1785 when Burns wrote "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer" he uses the term Auldfarran which means Sly, Cunning to describe Dundas as "And Ane, a chap, tha's damn'd auldfarran, Dundas his name".

Read many of Burns' works such as "Address to Beelzebub", "A Dream", "Ode to George Washington", "Ballad on the American War", "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer", "The Dagger" and "Here's a Health to Them that's Awa" and you find numerous references to these giants of the time, both British and American, sometimes favourable sometimes derogatory. So Gentlemen I ask myself were Burns' politics and ultimately some of his political writings as a result of the words and actions of those particular parliamentarians and their influences on society or did other influences also affect Burns' view?

Also in Parliament at that time was a man whose name is known the world over and whose words and work I believe, **to the surprise of many**, had a major influence on Burns.

William Wilberforce was born in 1759, exactly the same year as Burns, in the town of Hull, to a privileged upbringing . His father died young, he was sent to London to live with Methodist relatives where he met among many others the great John Newton, composer of the hymn “Amazing Grace”, who had previously been a slave captain.

After a period when religion played a major part in the young man’s life, Wilberforce went to Cambridge, participated in the university’s social scene, met Pitt Junior and, like Pitt, then entered Parliament with no great opinions except to be socially active.

Pitt Junior and Wilberforce were natural allies. They sympathised with the newly Independent America, visited France and met Benjamin Franklin and initially also had many sympathies for the French Revolution .

However in 1784, while en-route to Nice, Wilberforce shared his carriage with his old school master from Hull, Isaac Milner, who at that time was a devout Christian and held the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics at Cambridge. This is one of, if not the most prestigious Chairs of Mathematics in the world previously held by Isaac Newton and nowadays by Stephen Hawking.

From that fateful journey with Milner and subsequent meetings with John Newton, Wilberforce decided to make the abolition of the Slave Trade his role in life.

Now you might wonder what has this to do with Burns?

In 2004 Kofi Annan, the then Secretary General of the United Nations, said of Burns, “Burns has also been described as a Poet of the Poor, an advocate of social and political change and an opponent of pomposity and Slavery”. It is my view that if it had not been for Wilberforce and his nationwide campaign on Slavery these words might not have been correct.

I say that for the simple reason that while Burns grew up far from the 18th century slave ports of Britain he was aware of a different kind of slavery in his own country. Up until 1799 Coalminers and Salters in Britain were legally bound as Serfs to the Pit and Mine owners and could be bought and sold at will. Hence Burns in Ayrshire, where there were many coalmines, knew all about slavery in society but appeared to care little. Indeed before the Kilmarnock Edition was published it was the same Robert Burns who was going to the West Indies in 1786 as a manager of a slave plantation and all that involved.

And yet a few years later he was writing the Slaves Lament and later referring to Chains and Slavery in Scots Wa Hae. It is my opinion that it was Wilberforce’s campaign against slavery, started in 1786, which opened Burns’ eyes to injustice at home and abroad and encouraged him to use similar imagery in some of his works.

Part of Wilberforce’s campaign involved the famous potter Josiah Wedgwood who produced a small dish with the painting of a slave in chains kneeling in prayer and uttering the words “Am I not a Man and a Brother”. These plaques were made in their thousands and distributed throughout Britain as part of the campaign to mobilise support for Wilberforce’s views.

Burns would undoubtedly have come across them and the words written on it. Just think of the last lines of “A Mans a Man for A That”, “That Man to Man, the world over, Shall Brithers be for a that”. Compare it with Wedgewood’s plaque, “Am I not a Man and a Brother”. Maybe we owe Wilberforce a debt of gratitude, not only for his campaign against slavery, but also for giving Burns a phraseology which he was later able to adapt for his own use and is known the world over.

As an aside it might be of interest to know that while the First Bill to Abolish the Slave Trade was not passed till 1807 it should have passed the Commons in 1792 if it had not been for the self same Henry Dundas of Blair Atholl fame. He supported slavery and the wealth it created and by a devious piece of politics had the Bill postponed and ultimately lost for another 15 years.

Another man who was born at the same time as Burns and I believe had an important but indirect influence on his views and opinions was one James Macie.

Macie was born in some secrecy in France and was the illegitimate son of the Duke of Northumberland, one Hugh Smithson. Northumberland was then one of the most powerful men in Britain, hence Northumberland Avenue and Northumberland House in London. Macie’s mother was from Bath and was wealthy in her own right but at that time of her son’s birth was a widow. Being illegitimate he was given her late husband’s surname, Macie, rather than his biological father Smithson.

Over time Macie went to Oxford, he was at the forefront of the development of Geology and Chemistry in the late 1700s, was elected the youngest member of the Royal Society at the age of 22.

Edinburgh in the 1780s was the focus of much of the medical and scientific research in Britain, and Scotland, in the shape of Fingal’s Cave on Staffa, was the centre of great Scientific debate on the evolution of the planet. And so it was to Edinburgh that Macie came in 1784 to spend some time, en route for his Highland Tour.

In Edinburgh Macie met scientists like Sir Joseph Black who was then internationally renowned, and James Hutton who became known as the Father of Geology. After acquainting himself with Edinburgh Scientific and Literary society Macie set off, like Burns a year later, for the West Highlands visiting Dumbarton, Tarbet, Inveraray where he, unlike Burns, stayed with the Duke of Argyll. He then moved on to Oban and ultimately Staffa examining the Geology of the caves in great detail.

Returning to London Macie continued at the forefront of scientific work in Britain but was also very involved, through the Clubs and Coffee Houses of the capital, with political discussions on the Americas and the turmoil in France. He travelled to France to witness at first hand the Revolution, also met Benjamin Franklin and James Watt Jnr, son of the steam engine inventor, and wrote copious scientific papers.

More importantly in our story, however, he wrote political commentaries for many newspapers on the unrest in France and the need for Britain to change if it was not to follow the path of France into civil unrest and republicanism..

Indeed in 1792 Macie wrote in an article “A tolerant France will quickly outstrip all other countries in its progress. Other nations can only maintain any competition with it by emulating and even exceeding its political movement and changes”.

Such was the fear in Britain of the French Revolution that Scientists like Macie who expressed in public sympathetic views and encouraged change were often arrested or even had to flee to America. In 1793 the Traitorous Correspondence Act was passed by Parliament to silence many in the scientific community but by then it was too late. The views of Macie and his fellow scientists were now in widespread print throughout the country. In Scotland the number of newspapers grew from 8 in 1782 to 27 by 1790. Burns was able to read what was being said outwith the confines of Galloway. Change was in the air, very much as is occurring in American politics today, and hence when Robert Burns expressed his revolutionary thoughts in print or at the theatre in Dumfries it can be argued he was really putting in his own words the thoughts of Macie and his colleagues who had given a national lead on such topics.

As to Macie, he escaped prison but was never accepted by his biological father, Hugh Smithson, the Duke of Northumberland. Macie went through life as a pre-eminent scientist yet one with a chip on his shoulder on the class system in Britain. Socially he was always slightly on the outside. In 1803, on the death of his mother he changed his name from James Macie to James Smithson, his real father’s surname, to show his true descent. However all his life Macie or Smithson longed for the apparent meritocracy of America.

When he died in 1829 with no heirs Smithson bequeathed all his considerable scientific and financial fortune not to Britain but, because of his admiration for Franklin, to the United States to establish and fund a world renowned Scientific Institution.

Hence today when you visit the United States and tour the great Smithsonian Museum in Washington think of a little known chemist from Britain one James Macie Smithson, who saw the French Revolution at first hand, who was not afraid to publicise in print his opinions on liberty, freedom, political reform and class privilege throughout Britain and by so doing, in my view, shaped the political views and opinions of many, including our own national poet.

Obviously, thus gentlemen I believe politicians of the time and the policies they pursued played a significant part of much of Burns’ writing but let me now turn to one book and one person who possibly had the greatest influence on Burns’ political education.

The Parliament Act of 1696 had declared that every parish in Scotland should have a school in it under the supervision of the Kirk session. While many parts of 18th Century Scotland had such institutions others did not hence parents employed tutors for their and neighbouring children’s education.

No Parish school existed in Alloway so, as we know, William Burns employed John Murdoch as tutor to his family. As well as being a schoolmaster Murdoch introduced

the Burns family to many of the New Light and Covenanting ideas and philosophies then dominant in Ayr and the West of Scotland at that time.

Covenanters held the view that a Covenant existed between Rulers and the Ruled.

“The Role of Government was to Nurture and Preserve Society for the people. The Ruler must be a Physician to his people promoting their Health and Well-Being. If a King or Government forgets that or becomes a Tyrant then the people have the right to depose or change him and restore Health to the nation”.

Hence one understands why so many people in Britain supported the American War of Independence and, initially, the French Revolution. The Covenant had broken down between the King in Britain and the Colonists in America and the Monarchy in France and his people.

Murdoch, as Burns’ tutor, was a Covenanter and subscribed to these views.

At that time also the teaching of English had 3 stages, Elementary Reading, then Spelling and Vocabulary and finally Literature from Approved Authors.

For this last stage Murdoch, and indeed nearly all of Scotland, used a book entitled “A Collection of Prose and Verse” written by one Arthur Masson and published in 1764. Masson was educated at Aberdeen Grammar School and Marischal College.

Masson was also both a Covenanter and a Whig. Hence in the 320 pages of his Collection he used Fables, Stories of Ancient and Modern History, extracts from the Bible, parts of Shakespeare, Political Orations from Greece and Rome, selected poems of Milton, Addison and Pope plus letters and periodicals from recent publications nearly all of his material were in sympathy with Masson’s own political views. Hence from a very young age Robert Burns was imbued, or one could say indoctrinated, with the covenanting and at times radical views of the authors he read in Masson’s book. Together Murdoch and Masson contributed greatly to Burns’ political thoughts.

There is a phrase about “Give me a Child and I will-----“ and I believe there can be little doubt that, in spite of his young age, our national poet learned much about freedom, justice and the rights of man in his classroom, and later in life, by reading and memorising Masson’s book on literature.

If Burns was not a plagiarist he certainly used many of the phrases he read in Masson’s book to decorate his own works. Above all he can be seen in many of his poems to have adopted the Covenanting and Whig philosophy as exhibited in Masson’s choice of works.

This evening Gentlemen I have thus tried to look at Burns’ education, and one book in particular which influenced his thinking. I have tried to look at the political giants of his time, their policies and views and, in particular, examine two names, Wilberforce and Smithson, known throughout the world today, whose owners directly or indirectly also changed the way our national poet saw the world.

Burns, in my opinion, was a pragmatist whose political thinking changed with time, as is true of many of us. He was well read, interested in current affairs, was not afraid

to express his opinions and had the ability to poke fun at the establishment. Maybe our present Prime Minister should learn this latter quality.

Above all Burns had the ability and acuteness of mind to take on board the arguments and philosophies of others, possibly more central to political thoughts of the time, adopt their views and then express such opinions in Rhyme and Stanza, for the benefit of mankind.

I believe Scotland and the World lost much with the early passing of Robert Burns. His knowledge of History, Politics and Literature was a measure of the intellectual ability of our national poet, his political poetry has been a source of inspiration to countless generations throughout the world and so Gentlemen I ask you to rise and Toast with me the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.