

Gentlemen.

As I rise in trepidation to address you this evening my mind goes back to a message I remember reading many years ago. A message posted on the notice board of a wayside pulpit outside a church in my native Belfast. A message displayed with the intention of challenging all those who cared to cast an eye, as they happened to pass by. The words read "What on earth are you doing for heaven's sake" encapsulating a question very much on my mind tonight.

Gentlemen I am fully aware that the importance of being Ernest comes about this evening not through any merit on my part but because the Presidency of Paisley Burns Club follows a strict chronological sequence determined by the date on which one becomes a member. Indeed the only qualification required to make this speech is the ability to stay alive for about fifteen years in the faint hope that a smatter of the erudition of some of your illustrious fellow members may rub off along the way.

With half of the membership of tonight's top table made up of architects I take comfort and pleasure in remembering that this noble building was designed by the Belfast architect W. H. Lynn who won the right through competition scoring what might be described as an "away win". My friends I fear that this may be a concept totally unfamiliar to those brave souls amongst us who loyally support St. Mirren football club.

The Paisley Burns Club cherishes its traditions. As a consequence, and by way of ensuring variety, each President is expected to bring something from his own discipline and professional calling. This is a daunting challenge to a timorous Ulsterman who spent the first half of his working life as a Fire Loss Adjuster and the second as a Professional Beggar raising funds for charities. Twenty years ago when I organised the first Burns Supper for Accord Hospice under the tutelage of Tom Gibson and the late Lawrie Morton I little imagined that this would lead to my role here this evening.

In approaching my task of endeavouring to bring something original to you I discovered that the earliest volume in my meagre library, with any pretension to originality, is an old Autograph Book from my boyhood days containing the following entry from an honest uncle:-

"You ask me for something original but I don't know how to begin
For there's nothing original in me except original sin."

At least we have a starting point as sin was something Burns well understood in theory and in practice illustrating this to great effect in Holy Willie's Prayer.

*"But yet, O Lord! confess I must, At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshly lust:
An' sometimes, too in wardly trust, Vile self gets in;*

But Thou remembers we are dust, Defil'd wi sin."

In Mackay's A - Z, the Complete Word Finder, there are no fewer than 25 references to sin but only one to righteousness. Continuing on this theme I remember that sin had its origins in the garden of Eden that the Bible begins there but eventually ends with Revelations. In truth there is no shortage of material to study about the life and work of Robert Burns. Writing verse is a difficult art as I discovered to my cost in endeavouring to pen a few lines about the task in hand.

"I embarked on a mission, to achieve a suspicion of faint erudition and some recognition,

But the books I have studied, the books I have bought,
the countless opinions in print I have sought;

So many opinions, such differing views, who's do you follow, which do you choose.

I toiled with the essays of Thomas Carlyle, tho' they hardly encouraged a laugh or a smile,

Biographers differ in pictures they paint some make him a sinner, some paint him a saint.

I struggled with Ramsay and Fergusson too, as their influence on Burns is well known to be true,

I never liked Currie nor thought that MacNaught ever captured the flavour Ian Grimble has brought,

There's much to be said for MacKay and Kinsey and praise for the merit of dear Maurice Lindsay

In the end I discarded these treasures of wealth and decided to read what he'd written himself."

The only book handed down to me by my grandfather is a complete edition of the Poetical Works of Robert Burns.

His name, his address is written inside the front cover R. H. Smyth, 16 Avoca Street, Belfast, 1903, the year rather than the post code. Avoca Street took its name from the Vale of Avoca in Wicklow where two rivers join at the Meeting of the Waters. Steps lead down to an enchanting view and a bust of Thomas Moore, Ireland's national poet. Moore has certain parallels with Robert Burns. He too was a poet, a satirist, a composer and a musician of note. Moore's ten volume collection of Irish Melodies consists of some 130 poems of which many were set to his own music. Burns and Moore shared a love of nature and a fascination for rivers. Moore wrote The Meeting of the Waters and water flows like ink from the pen of Scotland's bard. Ye Banks and Braes and Flow Gently Sweet Afton are but two examples. Both men also shared a fascination for women and these few lines of Moore's might have proved a timely warning for

Robert:-

"The time I've lost in wooing,
In watching and pursuing,
The light that lies in woman's eyes,
Has been my heart's undoing.
Though wisdom oft has sought me,
I scorned the lore she brought me,
My only books were woman's looks,
And folly's all they've taught me."

Moore gave us the last Rose of Summer but the love of Burns was like a red, red rose. Similarities there may be and I would argue that the true measure of Burns is best gauged by comparison with other writers both in and beyond his own period but in truth, even I, have to concede that he is more than a match for Moore. Moore is remembered as a national poet. Burns is revered as an international poet of world renown.

My own introduction to the songs of Burns was brought to me on the air waves by that same red, red, rose back in the days of wireless before it became radio. The singer had the fine distinctive tenor voice of Kenneth McKellar who made the song his own. On the 23rd of June of this year this singing son of Paisley celebrates his 80th birthday. The planners of this year's Paisley Choral Festival, to be held at the end of October, will I trust avail themselves of the opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge his anniversary in an appropriate concert of song.

Three men share the credit for bringing us "My Love is like a Red, Red, Rose" Robert Burns, the author, Kenneth McKellar the singer and R A. (Robert Archibald) Smith. Launched in 1821 Smith's song collection "The Scottish Minstrel" included this song set by him to the traditional tune "Low down in the broom" and going on to achieve world wide fame. Many pieces by contemporary lyricists were set by Smith, one of these Motherwell's "Midnight Wind" earned special praise from Thomas Moore. When Burns wrote the song I doubt if he realised that in our time the evocative words of verse three would become a prediction of global warming.

*"Till a' the sea gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
And I will luve thee still, my dear
While the sands o life shall run."*

The music for the Selkirk Grace, beautifully rendered by our septet, before tonight's Dinner was also composed by R.A. Smith. This year marks the 200th anniversary of his appointment as leader of Psalmody in the Abbey Church

Paisley where he formed an excellent choir. In 1817 he conducted the first performance of public music in the Abbey and the success of this innovation set a well followed precedent. Smith left Paisley in 1823 on his appointment as musical conductor of St. George's Church Edinburgh and George McPhee succeeded him,just a few years later.

Apart from his music we are indebted to Smith in another way. The world's oldest constituted Burns Club was founded here in Paisley on 29th January 1805. The reason we and others all meet on the 25th is because the correct date of Robert's birth was discovered by R. A. Smith on examining the parish records in Ayr whilst he was working there as a music teacher.

When the Kilmarnock Edition was printed in July 1786 extracts were carried in the "Belfast Newsletter" and it is probable that Belfast was also home to the first edition printed outside Scotland. Many Ulster homes contained only two books, one was the Bible the other Burns. People in Ulster read his poetry and understood it, indeed some of the early copies didn't contain a glossary as many of the Scots words were in common use and as a consequence translations were not required.

After moving to Glasgow in 1973 to continue my career in Insurance Assessing I often found myself travelling towards Stranraer to deal with claims in the South West. Claims in that area were allocated to me because I could speak the language. Travelling between Stranraer and Ballantrae was a route well familiar to Robert Burns, as these lines of his prove;

*"As I came ower Glenap, I met a widow woman
Wha bid me keep ma heart
For the best o' my days is comin."*

Some would argue that the best of his days and the most productive and finest of his poems were written in 1785. Before moving to that period let's consider a pivotal year in 1781. A year in his life of change, transition and lasting consequences. In those days the ten mile journey from Tarbolton to Irvine was not an easy one. James McAdam, the man who was to become the Patron Saint of Irish navvies for services to road surfacing, had not yet begun the improvements he was to carry out as a member of the Ayrshire Turnpike Trustees.

Travel by horseback brought Burns numerous spills resulting in some lines that echo down the ages with a description, not out of place, here in Renfrewshire today.

"I'm now arrived - thanks to the gods!"

*Thro' pathways rough and muddy.
A certain sign that making roads
Is no' this peoples study,
Altho' I'm not with scripture crammed
I'm sure the bible says,
That heedless sinners shall be dammed
Unless they mend their ways."*

Upon his safe arrival in Irvine, Robert sought out the man who was to be his partner, his mother's half brother Alexander Peacock who he came to describe as *"a scoundrelwho made money by the mystery of thieving."* Burns's plans were well considered. He had joined the Masonic Lodge in Tarbolton and as a Mason he was assured of a ready-made source of friends in Irvine. Turning flax in to linen during the years before mechanical methods became available was a tedious and dusty indoor existence far removed from the fresh air of Lochlea. The noisy part of this process which entailed combing the fibres to clean them was known as heckling. In a newspaper article by David McKie I learned the origin of a word we now know as a political term.

"By the beginning of the nineteenth century the flax hecklers of Dundee had established a reputation as the most radical element in a famously radical town and were operating as a powerful trade union. They had gained control of trade dictating wages, conditions and bonuses. As a consequence the heckling shop had become the arena for violent harangue. When the hecklers moved from factory floor to public meeting they fired off interjections designed to comb out truths that politicians might prefer to conceal or avoid. Thus heckling entered the world of political debate, combining an incisive question with spontaneous wit and providing quick fire challenges to those speakers who could deal with them and amuse their audience with a ready response." Gentlemen, I proceed in the hope and belief that the behaviour and good manners of the members and guests of this illustrious Club will allow me to continue uninterrupted and I implore to you to resist any urge to heckle me tempting though this may be.

Robert Burns had an appropriate turn of phrase for any occasion but during his time in Irvine his verses depicted his sorry state of mind and the depression he experienced from work for which he was ill suited. Here he penned such melancholic works as his "Dirge to Winter" and "Prayer under Pressure of Violent Anguish." In the town of Irvine in 1791 the equivalent to a branch of Waterstones was the bookshop of one William Templeton where Burns found a peaceful haven away from the noise and dust of the heckling shed. Here, amongst the printed ballad sheets, he discovered the works of Smolett and, of even greater significance, the poems of Robert Fergusson;

" Rhyme had I given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scotch poems, I strung anew my wildly sounding rustic lyre with emulating vigour".

If 1791 had been a difficult year the start of 1792 was nothing short of disastrous. During a party to herald the new year his partner's wife, Mrs. Peacock knocked over a candle and the heckling shop was burnt to ashes. Sadly he had no insurance cover on the building or on the goods and chattels and there was no fire loss claim to adjust. Now Robert was a true poet worse off even than Mr. Kipps as Kipps at least had half a sixpence. Before leaving Irvine Burns met up with a new and significant friend. Captain Richard Brown was a sailor who had seen the world before being put ashore on the coast of Connaught to be robbed of everything he possessed. Perhaps sharing misfortune created a bond between them. Burns said of him:

"I loved. I admired him to a degree of enthusiasm: and I strove to imitate him. His knowledge of the world was vastly superior to mine, and I was all attention to learn. He was the only man I ever saw who was a greater fool than myself when woman was the presiding star: but he spoke of a fashionable failing with levity, which hitherto I had regarded with horror. Here his friendship did me a mischief."

To put it a shade more succinctly. When Burns gave up flax growing Richard Brown taught him how to sow wild oats! Another significant influence he had on the Bard was his encouragement to get his work into print emboldening Robert to become a poet. Also, at this time Robert toyed with becoming a soldier:-

*"Oh, why the deuce should I repine, and be an ill foreboder?
I'm twenty three and five feet nine, I'll go and be a sodger!"*

After the death of his father in 1784 Robert moved with the rest of the family from Lochlea in Tarbolton Parish to Mossgiel in the neighbouring parish of Mauchline. The years Burns spent at Mossgiel are widely regarded as the most productive in his life as a poet. This was his home for the next four years encompassing the most creative period in his short life. As Hans Hecht comments; "The floodgate of Burns genius burst its bounds and began to sweep irresistibly forward." Poems written in 1785 include Holy Willie's Prayer, Death and Dr. Hornbrook, To a Mouse, Halloween and the Cotter's Saturday Night. He also wrote Rantin, Rovin Robin at a time when he was doing much of his roving with two friends John Richmond and James Smith. On a wild winter's night this trio ended up in a Mauchline Inn in doubtful company unlikely to stimulate a work widely regarded as his first masterpiece but arguably one of his most neglected and underrated.

Chambers published Richmond's description of what occurred:

"After witnessing much jollity amongst a company who by day appeared to be miserable beggars, the three young men came away, Burns professing to have

been greatly amused by the scene but particularly with the gleesome behaviour of an old soldier. A few days later he recited part of the poem to Richmond.”

John Cairney describes the Jolly Beggars as a play with songs. The setting is Poosie Nansie's tavern in Mauchline a hostelry kept by Agnes Gibson. Her daughter was known as Racer Jess and in her day she was a bit of an expert in what we have come to know as logistics. Racer Jess was self - employed and provided a high speed courier service running errands on foot. Burns wished to include The Jolly Beggars in the first Edinburgh Edition of 1787 but was dissuaded by Hugh Blair who commented as follows:- "The whole of what is called the Cantata, the songs of the beggars and their doxies, with the grace at the end of them, are all together unfit in my opinion for publication. They are much too licentious; and fall below the dignity which Mr. Burns possesses in the rest of his poems and would rather degrade them." The Reverend Dr. Hugh Blair was the very essence of Edinburgh respectability combining his post as Senior Minister of the High Kirk of St. Giles with his appointment as Professor of Rhetoric at Edinburgh University.

Thomas Carlyle took a very different view as in his judgment The Jolly Beggars was the most strictly poetical of all Burns's poems. Carlyle put it this way: "This piece seems thoroughly compacted; melted together, refined and poured forth in one flood of pure liquid harmony. The blanket of night is drawn asunder for a moment; in full ruddy, flaming light these rough tattereddemalions are seen in their boisterous revel: for the strong pulse of Life vindicates its right to gladness even here." Gentlemen would you not agree that Carlyle's colourful and vivid description might equally apply to this function this evening!

Back in 1728 John Rich had produced John Gay's Beggars Opera, and so successful was that play that it made Gay rich and made Rich gay. Burns would have been aware of this work and of Ramsay's 18th century cantata but unlike Ramsay's wooden figures Burns needed only a line or two to set his characters alight. One of these was a little fiddler described in lines written in the stanza form called Standard Habbie after the poem made to one Habbie Simpson of Kilbarchan by Sir Robert Semphill of Beltrees. From these lines it is evident that he liked his women big and enjoyed reaching up to them.

*"A pigmy scraper on a fiddle
Wha us'd at trystes an fairs to driddle
Her strappin limb an gawsie middle
(he reach'd nae higher)
Had hol'd his heartie like a riddle
And blawn't on fire.
Wi hand on hainch, and upward e'e*

*He croon'd his gamut, one, two, three
Then in an arioso key
The wee Apollo
Set off wi'allegretto glee
His giga solo."*

Those are just a few of the words and now to bring you a taste of the music from The Jolly Beggars I have invited one of our own troubadours Robbie to sing the Bard's song: In this song the Bard is probably Burns himself and you will find that the tune and some of the words in the chorus are not unfamiliar!

*"So sang the Bard and Nansie's wa's
Shook with a thunder of applause,
Re echo'd from each mouth!
They toom'd their pocks, they pawn'd their duds,
They scarcely left to coor their fuds
To quench their lowin drouth:*

The cantata then concludes in chorus with the one verse Robert remembered well enough to quote in 1793.

*What is title, what is treasure;
What is reputation's care?
If we lead a life of pleasure
'Tis no matter how or where.
A fig for those by law protected.
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected
Churches built to please the priest!"*

It comes as no surprise that he ends with a final kick at the Kirk!

Later in a letter to Graham of Fintry in the course of his becoming an excise man Burns told his friend and benefactor that he believed the roving life of a ganger would facilitate the collection of material for a Scottish drama he had in contemplation.

In the time between his Edinburgh experience and in taking up his new post as an exciseman he had a clear aim to add to his laurels by becoming a playwright. The disjointed fragments and sketches he had already composed were waiting to be woven into a connected whole, in to a drama to emulate the achievements of other writers. In a letter to Lady Elizabeth Cunningham in January 1789, Burns wrote:-

"I have a hundred different poetic plans, pastoral, georgic, dramatic etc., floating in the region of fancy somewhere between purpose and resolve." We can only speculate on what might have been achieved in a life cruelly curtailed by ill health

and arduous work. In a letter to Mrs. Dunlop in 1788 Burns enquired:-
"Is not the Scotch phrase Auld Lang Syne exceedingly expressive. There is an old song and tune which has often thrilled through my soul. You know I am an enthusiast in old Scots songs. I shall give you the verses on the other sheet".
Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven inspired poet who composed this glorious fragment. There is more of the fire of native genius in it than half a dozen of modern English Bacchanalians." The song on the other sheet was Burns's first version of "Auld Lang Syne" the best known and most performed of all songs.

Gentlemen. I deem it a great privilege to have the honour of proposing this toast. I am not, nor can I ever claim to be a Scot, but home is where the heart is and my heart and my home are both firmly rooted in your beautiful country. My wife Leslie and I have loved Scotland enough to spend over half our lives here. When asked when I plan to go back home I give the answer every evening... to Kilbarchan

Driving up through the village I give a nod to Habbie Simpson, perched on his pedestal on the Steeple building, and thank him for lending his name to the Habbie Stanza . Perhaps the words of a famous quotation from your own Thomas Campbell encapsulate, in different ways, my feelings for my native Ireland and my adopted Scotland.

"Tis distance lends enchantment to the view."

No words of mine are adequate to pay tribute to the man whose memory we celebrate this evening. I hope you will agree that the lines I have just quoted from his letter to Mrs. Dunlop can be aptly turned around to apply to Robert Burns himself. Light be the turf on the heaven inspired poet who composed glorious fragments, glorious poems, glorious letters, glorious songs and not least a glorious cantata. Gentlemen. Please be upstanding and join me as we raise our glasses to toast THE IMMORTAL MEMORY OF ROBERT BURNS.