

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Gentlemen:

Like David Lloyd George's Honours List, the Presidency of Paisley Burns Club involves "no damned nonsense about merit". Unlike Lloyd George's Honours List, however, you can't buy your way into the Chair of this Club. Although, over the years, David Osborne makes sure that you pay for it! The tradition is that the chair is occupied by members in turn, in order of seniority. And, as the last minister to occupy the chair, the Revd. Donald Macdonald (who was one of my father's closest friends) said exactly forty years ago tonight:

It is one of the comforts of this privileged office that each President is expected, encouraged and exhorted to propose this toast in his own way.

So this evening, I propose to try to uncover what Robert Burns really thought about religion, and then to try to reveal a little of what the Church thought about Robert Burns, by referring to four churchmen whose lives span the period from Burns' death to the present day.

Robert Burns wrote to Alexander Cunningham on 10th September, 1792, "Of all nonsense, religious nonsense is the most nonsensical".

Burns didn't mean that religion itself is nonsense, but rather that nonsense talked in the name of religion is worse than any other kind of nonsenses. Because Robert Burns took religion seriously, and when he pictured people practising their religion with what he believed to be honesty then he treated religion with respect.

After describing the Cotter's Saturday Night:

*Compar'd with this, how poor Religion's pride
In all the pomp of method, and of art,
When men display to congregations wide
Devotion's every grace, except the heart!
The Power, incens'd, the Pageant will desert,
The pompous strain, the sacerdotal stole;
But haply, in some Cottage far apart,
May hear, well please'd, the language of the Soul;
And in His Book of Life the Inmates poor enrol.*

But if Burns didn't regard religion as such as nonsense, we have to be very careful about the claims we make about Burns' attitude to religion.

I had an uncle Jimmie who in many ways was remarkably like Burns. He was for many years a small tenant farmer, and when his farming failed he became a small tenant shopkeeper. He had little formal education, but he was very widely read. He attended church only for weddings and funerals and all his life he was a religious agnostic. When he died, the minister conducting his funeral, who had known him well (because like many, my uncle Jimmie regarded religion as a proper business for his wife) described him in a way that suggested he combined the religious faith of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the Christian compassion of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. And as we left the crematorium, his son, my cousin, said to me: "There should be a law against ministers baptising someone when he's dead".

There is no need to baptise Robert Burns when he's dead, for as we know he was baptised when he was only one day old, by the Reverend William Dalrymple. But there have been any number of ministers, on the Burns' Supper circuit, more than eager to claim Burns as a Christian. And I suspect that we do no honour to his memory by claiming more for him than he claimed for himself.

James Wardrop, whom you will hear from later, once said of himself: "I'm not a Christian; I'm an elder in Paisley Abbey".

I'm not sure that Robert Burns would have called himself a Christian.

And I say that not because he was someone who admitted to having religious doubts, for "there lives" (as a later poet from south of the border was to write) "more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds".

Burns had his fair share of "honest doubt".

"I fear every fair, unprejudiced enquirer must in some degree be a sceptic" he wrote to Alexander Cunningham on 14th February, 1790.

"It is not that there are any very staggering arguments against the immortality of man; but..., the subject is so involved in darkness, that we want data to go upon.

Thomas Carlyle in his famous essay on Burns, says:

He has no religion... His heart, indeed, is alive with a trembling adoration, but there is no temple in his understanding. He lives in darkness and in the shadow of doubt. His religion, at best, is an anxious wish; like that of Rabelais, 'a great Perhaps'.

For sure, that perhaps tells us as much about Thomas Carlyle as it tells us about Robert Burns, for I don't think it is true that Burns "has no religion".

He writes to Mrs. Dunlop on 9th July, 1790:

If God is good, which is, I think, the most intuitive truth in nature ... depending on a life beyond the grave is a very strong proof of the reality of its existence. Though I have no objection to what the Christian system tells us of another world, yet I own I am partial to those proofs and ideas of it which we have wrought out of our own heads and hearts.

And in another letter which Thomas Carlyle quotes in his essay, Burns says:

I never hear the loud solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild, mixing cadence of a troop of grey plover in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion of poetry... to what can this be owing?... I own myself partial to such proofs of those awful and important realities: a God that made all things, man's immaterial and immortal nature, and a world of weal or woe beyond the grave.

These extracts make clear, I think, two things about Burns' attitude towards religion.

First of all, it was an attitude he was prepared to think out for himself. Not for him, the evidence of the Bible or the sermons of the preachers: rather a religious conviction which he develops out of what he sees, and feels.

I have ever looked on mankind in the lump (he writes to Mrs. Dunlop on 1st January, 1789) to be nothing better than a foolish, headstrong, credulous, unthinking mob; and their universal belief has ever had extremely little weight with me - still, I am a sincere believer in the Bible, but Jam drawn by the conviction of a man, not the halter of an ass.

And his attitude to religion depended on the feelings which he experienced, particularly when contemplating the world of nature.

*Upon a simmer Sunday morn
When Nature's face is fair
I walked forth to view the corn
An' snuff the callor air,
The rising sun, ower Galston muirs,
Wi' glorious light was glintan,
The hares were hirplan down the furr,
The lavrocks they were chantan
Fu' sweet that day.*

But although nature was one of those proofs of the existence of God, to which Burns frequently writes he was "partial", there is nothing in the way he writes of it to suggest that nature provided him with the sort of mystical experience which made Wordsworth feel:

*A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion, and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.*

When Burns refers to God in his letters or poems it is almost always in an impersonal way. "The Supreme Being", "the Deity", "Almighty Cause", "Great Being".

However, you have to look long and hard through Burns' works to find any references at all to Jesus. And it is this fact which makes me question whether it is right to call him a Christian. His religious faith had a place for God, but Christianity is distinguished from deism by

having something to say about Jesus. William Nicol began a letter to Burns in 1793 with the words “Dear Christless Bobbie”, and perhaps he wrote more accurately than he intended.

There is a passing reference to Jesus in a letter to Agnes McElhose on 8th January, 1788, and it is less than precise:

The Supreme Being has put the immediate administration of all of this (he is referring to salvation) for wise and good ends known to himself, into the hands of Jesus Christ - a great Personage, whose relation to (God) we cannot comprehend but whose relation to us is a Guide and Saviour; and who, except for our own obstinacy and misconduct, will bring us all, through various ways and by various means, to bliss at last.

There are only two places (as far as I can see) where Burns’ poems suggest any use of New Testament themes or doctrines: One in his Epigram on Maxwell of Cardoness:

*Bless Jesus Christ, O Cardoness,
With grateful lifted eyes,
Who taught that not the soul alone
But body too shall rise.*

And the other in The Cotter’s Saturday Night:

*Perhaps the Christian volume is the theme
How guiltless blood for guilty man was shed.*

And it is perhaps significant that what Burns finds in “the Christian volume” is release from guilt. For his genuinely religious poetry (as distinct from his many religious satires) are only to be found amongst his early works and “they are dominated by submissive religious introspection, at times revealing the end-point of depression, the death wish”. If you want to discover anything about Burns’ personal attitude to religion after about 1786, you have to consult his letters, for his poetry after that date deal with specific controversies which caught his satirical imagination. In other words, these poems are about religion, rather than religious. They do, however, reveal that Burns was not prepared to put some kind of ring-fence around the world of religion and the Church and give either automatic respect!

Burns' early experience of religion was of bad religion, religion which instils and induces and plays upon a sense of guilt. And the wonder is not that he makes so little use of Christian themes or imagery, but that any religious dimension survived at all that early experience of unhealthy religion, which finds its way into these early poems but later disappears altogether.

*All devil as I am, a damned wretch,
A harden 'd stubborn, unrepentant villain,*

or

*Thou Pow'r Supreme, whose mighty Scheme,
These woes of mine fulfil;
Here, firm, I rest, they must be best,
Because they are Thy will!
Then all I want (Oh do Thou grant
This one request of mine)
Since to enjoy Thou dost deny,
Assist me to resign.*

Amongst these early poems are "A prayer in the prospect of death", and "Stanzas on the same occasion", and "A prayer, under the pressure of violent anguish":

*Thy creature here before Thee stands
All wretched and distrest;
Yet sure those ills that wring my soul
Obey Thy high behest*

Small wonder, then, that when later Burns began to write satires on the Church of his day, it was the guilt-inducing, orthodox Calvinists for whom he reserved his most scathing comments, and the "new lights" for whom he had more than a sneaking sympathy. For it was these "new light" preachers who tempered the worst excesses of the harsh, inflexible Calvinism of the orthodox.

Burns is at his most vehement attacking that: not just, as everyone knows, in Holy Willie's Prayer but in his Dedication to Gavin Hamilton:

*Learn three-mile pray'rs an' half mile graces,
Wi weel spread looves, an' lang, wry faces;
Grunt up a solemn, lengthen 'd groan,
And damn a' parties but your own;*

*I'll warrant then, ye're nae Deceiver,
A steady, sturdy, staunch Believer.*

However, when he turned to satire, Burns' preference for the liberal "new lights" within the Church of Scotland, the broad churchmen of his day, presented Burns with a problem. For they were the churchmen who supported the practice of the local lairds, or heritors, choosing who would be the minister of a parish, with the local congregation having no say at all. And you would expect that Burns, with his support for a growing democracy and his intuitive sympathy for the ordinary man over against the nobility - "the rank is but the guinea stamp, the man's the gowd for a' that" - would have supported those in his day who were whipping up opposition to the patronage of the landowners. But those who opposed patronage were, in the main, the rigid Calvinist evangelicals whose theology Burns disliked and whose teachings he had outgrown. So we find that Burns' satirist hand is somewhat stayed, at least on this issue which was beginning to divide the Church during Burns' lifetime, and was to continue to divide it for nearly fifty years after his death.

However, in other respects, he was far from inhibited in exercising his satirical powers at the expense of the Church. He wrote to Alexander Cunningham 27th July, 1788 of his eldest son:

By the bye, I intend breeding him up for the Church; and from an innate dexterity in secret mischief which he possesses, and a certain hypocritical gravity as he looks on the consequences, I have no small hopes of him in the sacerdotal line.

Sometimes he could be less subtle. For example, he described the Revd. Joseph Kirkpatrick of Dunscore like, this:

*My parish-priest is in himself one vast constellation of dullness,
and from his weekly zenith rays out his contradictory stupidity to
the no small edification and enlightenment of the heavy and
opaque pericraniums of his gaping admirers.*

That is an utterance worthy of David Osborne, though of course he could not say it of any minister known to him'!

And in another poem addressed to Gavin Hamilton,

*Some quarrel the presbyter gown,
Some quarrel EpiscOpal graithing
But every good fellow will own
Their quarrel is all about - naething.*

Burns' religion was never narrow. His critics would say, as the critics of liberal churchmanship today are still saying, that if you stand up for nothing in particular you will put up with everything in general. Be that as it may, he wrote to Agnes McElhose on 12th January, 1788:

I hate the very idea of controversial divinity; as I firmly believe that every honest, upright man of whatever sect will be accepted of the Deity.

So Burns was happy draining a glass in the company of the Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Bishop John Skinner of Aberdeen, even if it was out of respect for the Bishop's father, who had composed Tullochgorum rather than out of any respect for the episcopal purple. And it was a Roman Catholic Bishop, John Geddes, whom he described to Mrs. Dunlop as "the foremost cleric I ever saw". And bear in mind that this was at a time of anti-Catholic sentiment, when the house of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Edinburgh was burned to the ground by a mob.

That Roman Catholic bishop, John Geddes, was a subscriber to the Edinburgh Edition of Burns' poems, and he had copies of the Edinburgh Edition placed in the Colleges which trained Roman Catholic priests on the continent: at Valladolid, and Douay and Paris. I can find no trace of any early edition of Burns' works placed in the libraries of any of the Faculties of Divinity which trained ministers for the ministry of the Church of Scotland.

Perhaps not surprisingly, for if the attitude of Burns to orthodox religion was less than enthusiastic, the attitude of the Church to Burns was similarly unenthusiastic. And I'm not just referring to the occasions when he was brought before a Kirk Session to be disciplined for his sexual activities.

After he published "The Holy Fair" Burns was attacked in rhyme by a certain James Maxwell, a minister here in Paisley.

*The most solemn ordinance Christ hath ordained
Which hath in his Church, since his passion remained,
This infidel scoffer calls that but a Fair
To which rakes and harlots together repair
To make lewd appointments of carnal delight
Thus is it described by this hellish wight.*

One hopes, for his sake, that Mr. Maxwell stuck to his day job! When he was made a freeman of Dumbarton on 29th June, 1787, the magistrates of Dumbarton (who had conferred this honour on him) were roundly attacked from the pulpit of Dumbarton Parish Church by the minister, the Revd. James Oliphant, “for conferring honours on the author of vile, detestable and immoral publications”.

This was the same Mr. Oliphant whom Burns lampooned in his poem *The Ordination* so, if you think it is a coincidence that he regarded Burns poems as “vile, detestable and immoral”, as George MacLeod used to say: “I hope you have a very dull life”!

And it didn't stop with Burns' death. Forty years after Burns died, the minister of Galston whose moors Burns commemorates at the beginning of “*The Holy Fair*” was asked by the local doctor, Dr. Donaldson, if he would take the chair at a Burns Festival. The minister was Norman Macbeod, and he was young. MacLeod wrote to Dr. Donaldson:

Only consider the matter seriously as a Christian man, and say how we can, with the shadow of consistency, commemorate Burns after sitting down at the Lord's Supper to commemorate the Saviour? I have every admiration for Burns as a poet; but is it possible to separate the remembrance of his genius from the purposes for which it was so frequently used.., however much I may admire the beautiful poetry of Burns... I cannot, I dare not, as a Christian minister do this; neither can I but in the strongest manner disapprove of any dinner to his memory. What I have said would, I well know, in the estimation of the world be termed cant; but with the vast majority of thoughtful, well informed Christians, it is self evident truth.

Norman MacLeod was right about one thing: it was cant. But he is to be forgiven, not just because ministers, when they are young, are frequently given to cant, but because 20 years later Norman MacLeod, by then minister of the Barony Church in Glasgow and a power in the church, made partial amends. He was the only minister prepared to attend celebrations of the centenary of Burns' birth in Glasgow, and in his speech he said this:

Everything in our land, touched with the wand of (Burns') genius, will forever retain the new interest and beauty which he has imparted to us... so possessed are even railway directors and

rough mechanics by his presence, that they send 'Tam o' Shanter' and 'Souter Johnnie' as locomotives, roaring and whistling through the land that is called by his name and immortalised by his genius. How marvellously has he welded the hearts of Scotchmen throughout the world.

I said this speech made “partial amends” because Norman Macbeod again referred to “his deep sorrow..., for some things that Burns has written and which deserve the uncompromising condemnation of those who love him best”. And he went on to propose the publication of a centenary edition of Burns works “from which everything would be excluded which a Christian father could not read aloud in his family circle, or the Christian Cottar on a Saturday night to his sons and daughters.”

“Or” Norman MacLeod might have added “which a Church of Scotland minister might read without embarrassment to his monarch”, for a few years later he wrote to his wife from Balmoral, where he was a frequent guest of Queen Victoria:

The Queen is pleased to command me to remain here till Tuesday. After dinner, the Queen invited me to her room, where I found the Princess Helena and the Marchioness of Ely. The Queen sat down to spin at a nice Scotch wheel, while I read Robert Burns to her: Tam o' Shanter and A man's a man for a' that.

Perhaps, like me, you sense a certain “prissiness” in Norman MacLeod’s accommodating of himself to the stature of Burns. His contemporary Archibald Charteris (also as it happens a power in the Church and a favourite of Queen Victoria) was, I think, less prissily judgmental when he said (in replying to the toast to the clergy at a dinner marking the centenary of Burns’ birth) after extolling Burns’ merits as a poet:

If along with this there be errors of careless life and thoughtless word, we still do not soil our admiration of genius with approval of the erring man; but as it is the work of our profession to learn the weaknesses of humanity in ourselves and others, we need not live long to learn that if all of us had Burns’ fatal facility of matchless expression, there would be many words not less reckless than those which are blamed in him; and it would go hard with the character of the best of us if all the changing impulses, the light and shade of our human hearts, were daguerreotyped like his.

I quote these two men, Norman MacLeod and Archibald Charteris, because not only do I believe that far too many ministers proposing an Immortal memory have sought, unjustifiably to baptise Burns' views on religion, but far too many have been obsessed, equally unjustifiably, with his sexual morals.

And perhaps, since I've already quoted two Queen's Chaplains I may be allowed to quote a third: the present minister of St. Giles' Cathedral, Gillesbuig Macmillan. He says this in a book of sermons he has published:

Some years ago, I visited a school and preached a sermon about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Afterwards, a woman said to me that I ought to have told the young people that the Prodigal Son's father gave him a good scolding for being a bad boy. "But that is not in the parable" I said weakly, going on to try to suggest that it was also a fairly precise denial of the point of the parable. Undaunted, she told me that it was not right that my young hearers should get the impression that they could do all sorts of bad things and not be punished for them. Later in the conversation, she tackled me on the decision to install a window in St. Giles' Cathedral in memory of the poet Robert Burns. A great poet he may have been, and the maker of lovely songs, but how on earth could I justify a tribute in a Christian Church to a man whose relationships with women were notoriously unchaste? As I prepared to murmur some placatory defence (it was late on a Sunday evening, and I didn't feel like an argument) her husband said quietly "The Prodigal Son?" "Exactly"; said I, with relief

If, tonight, I've tried to put Burns' religious faith in perspective, I want to try to put those aspects of his life and character which churchmen have been embarrassed by into perspective as well. It doesn't make any more difference to the value of Burns' poetry that he was sexually promiscuous than it does to the poetry of W. H. Auden that he was, though Auden's sexual proclivities were rather different from Burns'. It has always been one of the failings of the Scottish church to regard sexual sins as much more serious than any other kind of sins. But if I read the Gospels correctly, I find there far more condemnation of injustice and exploitation and corruption than I do of sexual peccadilloes. And where he saw injustice, or encountered exploitation, or suspected corruption, Robert Burns was always to be found on the side of the angels! And if churchmen have been known to criticise Burns' drinking exploits too, let's put them into perspective. Just a few years after

Burns' death, the Thomas Chalmers, the greatest nineteenth century churchman, then minister of Kilmany in Fife, took a vow not to drink more than six bottles of claret..., at a sitting!

Let me close with one further quotation from a nineteenth century churchman: from Robert Rainy, Principal of New College and Moderator of the Free Church Assembly.

In 1872, the Dean of Westminster Abbey, Arthur Stanley, gave a series of lectures in Scotland, and in one of them he spoke of parts of Burns' poetry being "evangelical" and described Burns as "a wise religious teacher".

This provoked from Robert Rainy the sort of balanced response of someone who looked at Robert Burns with a clear eye but held him in the highest regard.

Can no-one stop the din that profanes the grave of Robert Burns? Has no-one the heart . . . to understand his voice? Of all the perverse destinies with which the earth could perplex his fame, did it ever visit his imagination that crowds of rhetorical men would go about in never-ending floods of eloquence to prove his life a great moral victory and triumph? Did he ever foresee that every after-dinner orator, who wished to show what a flexible thing Christianity can be, would harp upon the passages that saddened his own thoughtful hours (by which Rainy means these early poems which I quoted earlier) as proof of what may comport with high moral and Christian excellency? Shame upon those that are so destitute of love for Burns that have so little sympathy with the pathos of his own view of life as not to understand they are to let that alone! Why cannot they let that alone? Let them celebrate his genius, if it needs to be celebrated; let them celebrate his honest manhood - a great deal too straightforward, I will be bold to say, to tolerate the despicable sophistry that is spent on his career - let them dwell on the undying glow he has shed into Scottish minds and hearts and homes and lives and history; and for the rest, let it alone.

It is in those terms that we should think of Robert Burns; it is in that way that I have spoken of him this evening; it is in this spirit that I ask you now to charge your glasses and join me in the toast; "Croupier and Gentlemen: THE IMMORTAL MEMORY OF ROBERT BURNS".