

A Toast to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns

Delivered to the Paisley Burns Club on 25th January 2016 by Phil Hanlon

It is the tradition for all 'immortal memory' presentations to include elements of commemoration and celebration – we are here to remember and to take pleasure in the life and works of Robert Burns. However, the tradition of Paisley Burns Club is that it also includes an element of exploration. Thus, in the past, we have been treated to erudite explorations of how, for example, farming, music and banking impacted on the life and times of Robert Burns. Often, the President for that year, who has the responsibility for delivering the 'Immortal Memory', draws on his own professional background. Since the Club has been blessed by having a number of doctors as members, we have, over the years, learned much about the health – or more correctly, the ill health – of Robert Burns. This theme was pursued most recently by Iain Findlay who demonstrated all his skills as a diagnostician and concluded that the final cause of death was probably bacterial endocarditis.

For those who do not know me, I was Professor of Public Health at Glasgow University. Therefore, if I were to follow tradition, the obvious approach would be to explore what Burns had to say about the health of the population in his time. Members of the Club will know that another of our number – Andrew Tannahill – had a very distinguished career in public health. I, therefore, conferred with Andrew. We rehearsed what we knew about the health of the population of west central Scotland in the late seventeen hundreds? We agreed it was poor – infant mortality was above 200 per 1,000. Childhood and early adult mortality were high. Consequently, life expectancy was only around 30 years. We also agreed that Burns would have firsthand experience of the malign impacts of poor population health. For example, of the nine children he had with Jean Armour, six died during childhood and one of his loves (known to history as Highland Mary) died in early adulthood. Yet, Burns makes almost no comment about population health!

This begs the question why? What I want to suggest is that Robert Burns was part of a culture which had not yet embraced a worldview which was sensitive to population health issues in the way that we are today. This insight prompted me to explore the worldviews that were dominant and emerging during his time and the approach these took – not so much to public health – but to the suffering caused by poor population health.

I spent some of my early career undertaking research in The Gambia. I still remember feeling shocked when the opinion was expressed to me (more than once) that Gambian women experienced the death of a child so frequently that they did not feel the sense of loss in the same way as European women. I can assure you from firsthand experience that this suggestion is simply wrong. The feelings of loss are universal but the worldview that determines how we express and rationalise loss varies across time and cultures.

So, I will seek to address three linked questions:

1. What were the worldviews that competed for attention while Burns was alive?
2. How did each deal with death, disease and suffering?
3. What did Burns have to say about each?

The dominant worldview was Christian. The emerging worldview was the rationalism of the Scottish Enlightenment. However, we must first consider the old pre-Christian worldview of Scotland because it still had a hold on many.

As it was not a literate culture, we must infer much of what we know about pre-Christian Scotland from other evidence. Settlements were small and isolated – cultures were accordingly local. The spirit world was very real and the dominant belief systems dictated that everything encountered and experienced had its causative forces in the spirit world. This worldview understood illness, death and suffering as the out workings of spirit forces. What could people do to protect themselves? The answer was an array of means which included rituals, charms and the works of a shaman. These, it was believed, could ward off evil spirits.

His biographers claim that Burns learned much about these traditions from Betty Davidson who was the widow of the cousin of his mother.

'She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, contraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons, and other trumpery.'

Of course, by the 18th Century these myths had melded with the dominant Christian worldview and I think we can discern two clear dimensions to the reaction that Burns had to what emerged.

First, his commitment to progressive ideas made him sceptical about folk belief. We see this in 'Address to the De'il' (1785). Burns laughs at the devil getting the blame, according to parochial superstitions, for milkless cows and impotent husbands.

The Devil of these superstitions owes more to folklore than to Christian theology and the same is true of the Devil who plays the pipes to create the music for the dancing in the graveyard in Kirk Alloway in Tam o'Shanter (1791). This section of the poem celebrates the exuberance of the pre-Christian world and its uninhibited physicality and sexuality. I think this is the second dimension of what we can discern about the attitude Burns had to pre-Christian traditions. In Tam o'Shanter he contrasts, by implication, the exuberance and freedom of the dance of an attractive witch with the inhibitions of Calvinism and the constraints of enlightenment 'reason'. Tam forgoes all 'reason' and 'reserve' for an expression of pure human instinct when he exclaims, 'Weel done, Cutty-sark!' Tam is a celebration of natural human feeling in the face of the contemporary emphasis on sombre logic.

The dominant worldview of the day was, of course, Christian. However, to explore that worldview properly, we need to be aware of two manifestations or expressions of Christianity which were experienced in Scotland. First, the traditional and more widespread European Christian practice and, second, the Calvinist form, that took hold in Scotland for a period following the Reformation.

The manner in which the beliefs of a small set of Christ's followers became the dominant – almost universal – belief system of Western Europe by the Middle Ages is a complex story that is beyond the scope of this presentation. We might, however, if we wish to understand how medieval Christendom coped with death, disease and loss, turn to the writing of Thomas Aquinas. He melded early Christian and Greek thought in a very influential manner believing that truth is known through reason and faith – nicely summarized in the quote *'To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible'*.

How this tradition thought about death, disease and suffering might be over simplified into the following formulation:

- God works in mysterious ways and we might not see the good that could eventually result.
- That said, bad things (truly bad things) do happen. They are not caused by God but are, rather, the inevitable consequence of the fact that a sovereign God created us with free will. That free will creates the possibility of rebellion – first manifested in the fall of Adam and Eve and then shared by repeated acts of sinful rebellion on the part of all people who have lived. Wilful rebellion against God (sin) is, therefore, the root cause of death, disease and suffering.
- The 'good news' of the Christian gospel is that salvation is possible - leading to a sanctified but still sinful and painful life on earth but the 'sure and certain' promise of resurrection after death.
- This sanctified life is lived in community with other Christians and is experienced through the seven sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony."

Some version of this summary would have been believed by almost all Scots prior to the reformation and by many at the time of Burns. The many people who still embraced these beliefs lived in small close knit communities and shared values which I think Burns appreciated.

As a worldview, it brought consolation in the face of suffering on several levels. First, the shared belief of small close knit communities provided mutual support in the face of suffering. Second, it provided an explanation for disease, death and suffering. Third, shared participation in the sacraments was, from contemporary accounts, a comfort. Finally, the belief in resurrection and, with it, the defeat of death, sin and suffering, was believed literally and, therefore, powerfully.

The hegemony around this worldview lasted several centuries in Europe but came under pressure through the renaissance and then the reformation. It can be argued that the reformation was, above all, a response to social change. Towns, cities and larger settlements were being established. Trade was growing, a middle class was emerging and, through the printing press, the written word was being disseminated. A critique of the excesses of the medieval church played a part. However, the people of that period were looking for a more internalised and individualised faith – the reformation provided it.

The version of the reformation that Scotland embraced during the 16th Century was Calvinism. How did Calvin understand death, disease, loss and suffering? His emphasis was placed on the sovereignty of God and the total depravity of human kind. The latter does not infer that all are as evil as they could be – rather, that all aspects of human nature are flawed and there is nothing we can do to earn favour from God. Humans can only be accepted through God's grace. But, since God is sovereign, he chooses those who will respond and gives them the impulse to respond. Suffering, death and illness are the result of sin and are the just punishment of a sovereign God.

In a moment I will turn to the critique that Burns made of Calvinism. Certainly, on the face of it, this doctrine provides little comfort and support for people facing suffering and loss. That said, the biographies of leading Calvinists show that it could engender deep devotion to God which led to an

acceptance of his will. What I will say is that Calvinism must have emerged for a reason – it must have met some need during the time that it emerged.

There is little doubt, however, that Burns took a dim view of Calvinism or the ‘Old Lich’ teaching of the Church of his day.

For example, on a visit to Linlithgow, he commented:

‘What a poor, pimping business is a Presbyterian place of worship, dirty, narrow, and squalid, stuck in a corner of old Popish grandeur such as Linlithgow and, much more, Melrose! Ceremony and show, if judiciously thrown in, is absolutely necessary for the bulk of mankind, both in religious and civil matters.’

This hints at one of his more profound critiques – that Calvinism failed to work with the grain of human nature. His second objection was that the adherents of the Old Lich were guilty of hypocrisy and manifested a harsh judgemental spirit.

These thoughts are developed in the ‘The Holy Fair’ (1786). Describing an event common in those days, the Holy Fair shows no bitterness toward any of the characters held up for the reader’s amusement, only a delighted acceptance of the bustling scene, and of the different kinds of hypocrisy, confusion, enthusiasm, drinking, and lovemaking which were to be found there. Amidst all the formality, a natural piety is glimpsed. The people who are used to saying grace at home but who are too shy to take the lead among others are uncomfortable until one of them plucks up courage to do so - there are echoes here of a Cotter’s Saturday Night (1785). The poem ends with a brilliant summing up of the incongruous elements of which the occasion was composed:

*There's some are fou o' love divine
There's some are fou o' brandy
An' monie jobs that day begin
May end in Houghmagandie
Some ither day.*

The suggestion here is that the Holy Fair has been used by the young people largely as an excuse for getting together and for making further appointments. It is a further insistence that nature will have her way even in the midst of a theological jaunt.

‘Address to the Unco Guid’ (1787), tells of those who lived lives beyond reproach (or at least on the surface they did) but, not content with this, they also revelled in pointing out the faults of those who didn’t. As Burns remarks,

*O ye wha are sae guid yoursel',
Sae pious and sae holy,
Ye've nought to do but mark and tell
Your neibours' fauts and folly!*

This was a sore point for Burns who had experienced the sharp end of criticism about his own behaviour. Above all, this poem points the finger at judgementalism but I will say no more as it will be the subject of Robbie Menzie’s reading later in the evening.

'Holy Willie's Prayer' (published posthumously in 1801), is much harsher. The eponymous Willie addresses a Calvinist God who 'Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,/A' for thy glory. Willie's words reveal Calvinism's objective (as Burns sees it): to stamp on human pleasure, and to instil a fear of God into its followers. Burns portrays Calvinism's contradictions as ridiculous, advocating instead a religion based on innate virtue.

In a 1962 book, Thomas Kuhn argued that a worldview or paradigm begins to collapse because it ceases to answer the important questions that people ask of it. The new worldview emerges as it seeks better or more effective answers. During the lifetime of Burns, a new worldview – the Enlightenment – was emerging across Europe, but with particular force in Scotland. In 1784, Emmanuel Kant asked the question - What is Enlightenment? It was, he suggested, nothing less than the freedom to argue for your own ideas without being forced to comply by authoritarians: the general who says: "Do not argue – drill!"; the taxman who says: "Do not argue – pay!"; the priest who says: "Do not argue – believe!" To overcome them, you must first understand that "the public use of one's reason must be free at all times and this alone can bring enlightenment to mankind".

It would be wrong, however, to imagine that one worldview simply replaces the former. Just as Christianity in Scotland transcended but also included much of the pre-Christian worldview, so the Enlightenment and Christian worldviews melded in the years that followed. Calvinism would not last as the dominant worldview but nor would it disappear. In his lifetime, Burns saw reform in the Church of Scotland – the New Lich. Today, the Church of Scotland that I know has, at its best, a melding of Enlightenment and traditional Christian values but its main strength comes from a sense of community and mutual support.

The focus of this address – how people find support in the face of suffering and loss – was at the fulcrum of the changes which saw the Enlightenment emerge. In 1755, the Lisbon earthquake caused devastation and up to 50,000 deaths. Four years later, Voltaire's *Candide* attacked the notion that the world is supervised by a benevolent deity. Voltaire's argument was that - if God is sovereign he is not loving: if he is loving, he is not sovereign. Voltaire went on to argue that the world we know is only material – we should remove all spiritual forces from our ideas of causation.

As a consequence, the enlightenment or rationalistic world view that emerged took a very different view of death, disease and suffering. It can be summarised as follows:

- All phenomena are natural – there is no spirit world or hand of God at work.
- The scientific method can be used to understand the natural world.
- This can lead to practical solutions.
- These solutions can be implemented by the organised efforts of society (the idea of the modern nation state emerges).
- When people suffer, it is always a tragedy and sometimes an injustice. It should motivate us to prevent and alleviate suffering.
- There is no solace to be found in an afterlife or a higher plan.

This is the worldview that led to the emergence of public health – as a science but also a social movement. Scientists like Pasteur and Koch discovered the nature of infectious diseases while Jenner pioneered vaccines. The industrial revolution created desperately unhealthy cities in the first instance but civic reformers transformed them with clean water, sewerage, town planning,

economic growth and – well, all the benefits of modernity that we now recognise. The result? - life expectancy more than doubled while the quality of life has been transformed. Of course, in time, modernity manifested its own set of problems: but, that was for the future. At the time, Burns was clearly drawn to the new worldview.

What he recognised was that the new worldview was potentially transformational. One of his greatest poems 'A Man's a Man for A' That' (1796), speaks of the universal rights of all humankind. Burns was not just drawn to the Enlightenment in Scotland – he helped to make it happen.

However, let us not get too carried away with this thought. Burns was also a man who had plans to travel to Jamaica to work on a slave plantation. For all he 'loved the lassies' he behaved towards some in a manner that would not only upset the Uco Guid but many modern feminists (or, perhaps more accurately, modern women). This suggests to me that Burns was guilty of his own brand of hypocrisy. Carl Jung argued that the parts of our personality we find most objectionable are relegated to the unconscious mind in what he called the 'shadow'. We cannot directly access our own shadow but we can recognise its presence because we find these aspects of personality most objectionable in others. Is it possible that the vitriol Burns expresses towards Holy Willie's hypocrisy was, at least in part, his own shadow speaking?

What we can say is that Burns was a progressive who lived at a time when a transformation from an agricultural and universally Christian Scotland into an industrial nation with a more complex relationship to religion was beginning. Our brief exploration of his work reveals that he (i) felt a deep human connection with the exuberance and physicality of the pre-modern worldview while rejecting its folklore (ii) admired the local rootedness and simple piety of traditional Christianity (iii) rejected Calvinism – but perhaps his relationship to it is psychologically more complex than meets the eye (iv) was drawn to the enlightenment worldview but was too early in the process of modernity to experience many of the fruits of improved health that modernity would in time manifest. Indeed, for many, the price of the new worldview was that, for all the material benefits it brought, it created a world without enchantment or some of the support provided by religion. Also, for all its benefits, modernity has brought with it a range of problems for which a purely rationalistic perspective has little to offer – hence the emergence of the Romantic Movement and the persistence of Christianity. Where did that leave Burns in terms of his attitude to loss and suffering? Man was made to Mourn (1784) provides some insight. This cheerless poem illustrates the Bard's loathing of the class differences between the workers and the land-owners. It shows again his deep compassion for the man trying to find work in order to feed and house his family. Two lines raise it to the level of a modern proverb:

'Man's inhumanity to man Makes countless thousands mourn!'

What I find remarkable is that a relatively short lived, near subsistence farmer from Ayrshire has written poems and songs that speak to us with continuing relevance about each of the world views we have been considering. He offers us both appreciation and critique of each. This is why he is commemorated and celebrated. Gentlemen, I give you 'The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.'