

Gentlemen,

. On his deathbed on 21 July 1796 Robert Burns said to Jean Armour,  
*'I will be more thought of 100 years after this than I am now.'*

It was a remarkably accurate prophecy; except that it did not go far enough and 100 years later in 1896 one of his biographers made an equally accurate prophecy,

*'It is safe to say that 100 years hence he will be more thought of still.'*

Tonight on this bi-centenary of Paisley Burns Club I would like to look back over 200 years of continuous celebration of the life and works of Burns and in passing, ask you to think about two questions. Why has it lasted so long and will it last another 200yrs?

The explosion of interest in Burns started almost immediately after his death. His magnificent funeral was followed by a flood of biographies and editions of his work that has continued to this day. Thousands of monuments and statues have been erected. Hundreds of Burns clubs have been formed and this month innumerable Burns suppers will be held across the world. It is a phenomenon which has been variously described as the Burns movement, the Burns cult, and even Burnomania.

And yet the seeds of all of this were sown on very unpromising ground. Some of the earliest works on Burns portrayed him as a degenerate drunkard. James MacKay in his 1992 biography claims that some of the early writers created *'a perception that he had 70 illegitimate children, drank himself to death and died a pauper.'*

It was even said that one year after Burns's time in Edinburgh his face could be seen in every pram in Princes St.

Three people were very influential in setting the early scene. The first was his friend Maria Riddell who wrote a memoir for the Dumfries Journal one month after Burns's death. It was essentially a sympathetic treatment although she did mention what she called his 'frailties.' However in a memorable sentence she attempted to put them into some kind of perspective.

*'It is only on the gem we see the dust, the pebble may be soiled and we never regard it.'*

The next to go into print was Robert Heron, a preacher turned writer. Heron had been satirised by Burns and possibly had an axe to grind. His 'Memoir on the Life of Burns' was anything but sympathetic. He said of Burns's time in Dumfries.

*'The morals of the town were deplorably corrupted and though a husband and father poor Burns did not escape suffering by the general contamination.'*

Heron is regarded as one of the villains of the Burns legend and in that category he joins the third of these early writers James Currie, whose 'Life of Burns' was published in 1800.

Currie, a doctor by profession, had had no training in literary scholarship. Prior to his biography of Burns his major publication had been a report on the effects of

water as a remedy in fever; whether to apply it to the surface of the body or give it as a drink. The name Currie is now anathema to Burns worshippers. He characterised Burns as a 'flawed genius' and is blamed for having blackened the name of Burns for decades to come. Two sentences in particular have been held against him over the years.

*'He who suffers the pollution of inebriation, how shall he escape other pollution. But let us refrain from the mention of errors over which delicacy and humanity draw the veil.'*

But of course many did not refrain from inferring what Currie was alluding to and the stigma of venereal disease was added to the list of Burns's failings.

So if we take stock of the Burns situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century we find a poet who had been out of the public eye for more than a decade, whose poetic output in the final years of his life had been limited and whose character had been publicly denigrated. It hardly seems promising circumstances for the start of a love affair with the Scottish public that is to last for the next 200 years. And yet that is exactly what happened. From about 1800 onwards groups began to meet, at first informally, to honour the memory of the poet. Then of particular interest to us tonight, on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1805 a company of 70 Paisley men sat down to dinner in the Star Inn, to honour the poet and to found the Paisley Burns Club. The minute of that meeting written in the hand of our first Secretary Robert Tannahill establishes this club as the first in the world to reach its bicentenary, with the birth certificate to prove it.

That first dinner not only marks the birthday of this club, it also tells us something about attitudes to Burns. Here we have a man whose personal reputation has been blackened and yet 70 of Paisley's most respectable citizens were prepared to sit down to dinner in his honour. They knew what was being said about him but their view of its worth was clear. In that very first Immortal Memory, the President on that evening, Mr William Mc Laren referred to *'the poisonous tongue of calumny which has blazoned him to the world as an enemy of virtue'* and went on to say, *'Gentlemen, I would consider it an insult offered to the discernment of this respectable company were I to labour a refutation of an assertion which almost every page of the writings of this admirable poet is calculated to deny.'*

Even as early as this then we begin to see the emergence of widely divergent views on Burns. His poetic genius was acknowledged by all, but for some that genius had been devalued by dissipation. For others its brilliance absolved him from the character judgements applied to ordinary men. These opposing views have been around ever since. For every attack on the poet there has always been a counter-attack and since controversy is always more interesting than consensus it could be argued that the controversy which surrounded him has been one factor in sustaining interest in the poet over such a long period.

The first period of the Burns movement from 1800 to the centenary of his birth in 1859 could be described as the foundation period. New biographies came from authors such as Cromek, Lockhart (son-in-law of Walter Scott) and Cunningham. These names are not well known to us today but their works were best sellers in their time. They all still peddled the theme of 'flawed genius' that had started with Currie and by today's standards their works are regarded as incompetent. Indeed one modern scholar, the American Franklin Bliss Snyder, described Lockhart's biography as, '*Inexcusably inaccurate from beginning to end and at times demonstrably mendacious.*' Nevertheless, incompetent or not, they made an important contribution to stimulating interest in the poet.

Others whose names are better known also put their thoughts on Burns into the public domain at this time. Walter Scott said of his songs, '*No poet of our tongue ever displayed higher skill in marrying melody to immortal verse.*' Thomas Carlyle said, '*He was not only a true British poet but one of the most considerable men of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.*' One could quote similarly from the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Byron, Longfellow and many others. It is instructive for us today to appreciate that Burns had achieved sufficient status in the literary world to attract the attention of these eminent figures. It gives us some reassurance that in honouring Burns, we are not simply succumbing to chauvinism but are giving honour where honour is due.

Knowledge of Burns and his works was also spread via the growth of Burns clubs. After this club in 1805, the Burns Federation lists Kilmarnock 1808 and Dunfermline 1812 as the next clubs to be formed. However Robert Brown's 'History of Paisley Burns Clubs' describes the founding of a club in Kilbarchan in 1806. Brown's account gives us an insight into another element in the long-lasting appeal of Burns. It appears that the dinners of this first Kilbarchan club were rather aristocratic affairs so the New Kilbarchan Burns Club was formed to cater for the lower social orders, who in keeping with the radicalism of the time dined on bread, cheese and water lest they consumed anything which contributed tax revenues to the Government. Clearly the appeal of Burns was not limited to any one social grouping but spread across the social spectrum. The American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, '*People who care little for literature and poetry care for Burns.....he was the poet of the poor, anxious, cheerful, working humanity....*'

One of the landmarks in this early period of the Burns movement was the 1859 centenary of his birth. In Paisley a committee was set up to organise a banquet in the Exchange Rooms. However it soon became clear that this would not satisfy all the Buddies who wanted to celebrate and a 'committee of the working classes' was set up to make arrangements for a celebration of the lower orders in the Abercorn Rooms. In the event, the lower orders organised another ten events in the town. In the Exchange Rooms 270 gentlemen sat down to dinner commencing at 5.00. And at the risk of making you feel you are being short changed tonight gentlemen, I can tell you they enjoyed an evening of 28 speeches and 43 musical items. No fewer than

676 celebratory events were held in Scotland, 76 in England, 61 in the US and 60 elsewhere in the world including one in Copenhagen.

These 1859 celebrations didn't just mark the end of one phase of the Burns movement they also provided the momentum to take it on into the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period which MacKay has described as, '*veering towards idolatry.*' A rash of statues, busts and plaques appeared all over the world. In 1885 a marble bust of Burns was unveiled in Poet's corner in Westminster Abbey, by the then Prime Minister Lord Rosebery. MacKay estimates that today, worldwide, there is something like 2000 statues of Burns. If statues could talk some of them would have interesting tales to tell. One of the earliest was erected in the Burns monument on Calton hill. It was then moved to the library at Edinburgh University but it was expelled from the University by the Principal, Dr John Lee, on the grounds that Burns was not a graduate (so much for the policy of wider access). Sixty five years after it was first commissioned it finally came to rest in the National Portrait Gallery. As you would expect there is a statue in just about every sizeable town in Scotland. Most of them were erected by public subscription which tells us something about the level of public acceptance of Burns at the time. Hundreds of Burns statues are also to be found abroad. I have seen them in Sydney, Dunedin, New York and Vancouver, just a few of the places where the Scottish Diaspora has settled. The longing of emigrant Scots for a cultural link with their homeland which preserves their Scottishness has been another significant factor in Burns's lasting popularity.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw a rapid acceleration in the creation of Burns clubs, stimulated by the founding of the Burns Federation in 1885. One of the new clubs was in Paisley where at the inaugural meeting of the Paisley Gleniffer Club in 1893, the Chairman, referring to the founding of our club in 1805, went on to say,

*'But gentlemen, years have come and gone since then, men have become more human, our ideas have broadened.....and so it has been felt for some time past that we ought to have a more popular club in Paisley.'*

It is a salutary reminder to us gentlemen to heed the words of the poet,

*'O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us.'*

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Burns movement was in full swing. The last major anniversary of the century, the centenary of his death in 1896, was therefore an occasion for massive celebration. In Dumfries Lord Rosebery officiated at the wreath laying ceremony at the Mausoleum attended by over 8000 admirers, including four delegates from this club, who were greeted by Rosebery with the immortal words '*The oldest I believe*' referring we presume to the club rather than the delegates.

Rosebery dashed by special train from Dumfries to Glasgow where that same evening he opened a great exhibition of Burns memorabilia. 600 different editions of

Burns's works were exhibited including translations in Flemish, Hungarian, Medieval Latin and even a translation in English. Also on show were hundreds of artefacts including Burns's favourite drinking cup which had been presented to this club in 1814 by James Armour, the brother of Jean Armour. Among the exhibits from the Poets household was Jean Armour's rolling pin and a lock of Burns's hair. We are not told whether the hair was attached to the rolling pin!

Rosebery also appeared in Paisley to unveil the statue of Burns in Fountain Gardens. This involvement of a former Prime Minister with the Burns Movement reminds us of the way in which over the years Burns has been appropriated by politicians of all political parties. Gladstone, Keir Hardie, Churchill and just about every contemporary political leader has quoted him at some time to support their own political view. The inability of any one ideology to claim exclusive rights to him or to put it another way, the universal nature of his appeal, provides another reason for his enduring popularity. Edwin Muir put it this way,

*To the respectable, Burns is a decent man*

*To the Rabelaisian, a dandy*

*To the socialist, a revolutionary*

*To the nationalist, a patriot*

And so on.....

As the Burns movement moved on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century you might have thought that with the expansion in opportunities for public entertainment, the cinema, radio, TV etc, that the Burns star would have begun to decline. But we know that was not the case. The debate on the character of Burns gradually subsided, partly because most controversies lose their heat over the years and partly because later scholars who relied more on primary sources than on earlier work, brought a more balanced view to accounts of his life. The output of biographies and editions of his works still continued apace. A translation of his poems into Russian in 1929 sold over 1m copies and although I don't think anyone has counted, it would not surprise me if there has been more published on Burns than on all other Scottish writers put together. Hugh MacDiarmid believed that the emphasis on Burns has stifled the development of Scottish poetry in particular and Scottish literature in general. MacDiarmid was scathing in his criticism.

*'The Burns cult must be killed stone dead.....Scotland will signalize that it has come to itself again and resumed its proper attitude to world affairs when it makes a bonfire of all the..... pitiable relics that antiquarian Burnsians have accumulated'*

It has been argued that as a poet himself MacDiarmid's views were coloured by the lack of recognition which he himself received. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this argument not a lot of attention has been paid to his views and as a nation we remain concentrated on Burns, albeit at a number of different levels, from at one end of the spectrum the scholarly academic, to at the other end, the rabid once a year supporter who attends a Burns supper, belts out a verse or two of The Star of Rabbie

Burns and declares it the best thing Burns ever wrote! However these annual Burnsians are not to be scoffed at. The adoption of Burns as a catalyst for a good night out may be as important a factor as any in maintaining public recognition of the man if not of his works.

I started this Immortal Memory by asking why our love affair with Burns has lasted two hundred years and although I may have given some clues I fear I have not given an explicit answer to the question. I suspect that there is no single answer. I have touched on the idea that controversy can fuel long lasting interest. I have mentioned the momentum generated by publications and by regular doses of anniversary celebrations, the way in which he appeals across all classes and can be all things to all men, the nostalgic pull he exerts on the Scottish Diaspora, the spread of Burns Clubs and the social appeal of Burns suppers. Are there any other explanations? At the Bicentenary conference in Strathclyde University Richard Finlay argued that the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of profound change in Scottish society and the prospects for the survival of Scottish identity looked bleak, '*Burns provided an iconic figure around whom many of the aspects of Scottishness could be consolidated, the lad o' pairts mythology, patriotism, the dignity of mankind*' and so on. That need for an icon has not left us in the past 200 years and unless Walter Smith takes us to the final of the World Cup, and wins it, Burns is unlikely to be displaced for another 200 years.

As you are bound to have noticed during this month of January, TV and Radio and other media, have helped to keep Burns interest alive. Thespians like John Cairney have also contributed. Cairney's one man show portraying Burns must have played to hundreds of audiences. He even took the show to a mental institution and was very concerned about how it would be received. But it was fine, the audience were very sympathetic, but he didn't appreciate why, until as he was leaving he heard one inmate say to another, 'why is that guy getting out of here if he thinks he's Robbie Burns?'

However, it may be that the answer that comes closest to explaining the enduring popularity of Burns is also the most obvious. It is simply that his poetry has an everlasting appeal. It would be possible to quote Burns for the next hour in support of that contention but that would test your patience to breaking point. Instead I have chosen to quote one verse from one song. It was quoted by Norman MacCaig when he gave the Immortal Memory to a televised Burns Supper in Scone Palace. It contains a line which Hugh MacDiarmid stated was the best line that Burns ever wrote.

*'Yestreen when to the trembling string  
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha'  
To thee my fancy took its wing,  
I sat, but neither heard or saw;  
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw  
And yon the toast of a' the town,  
I sighed and said amang them a'  
Ye are na Mary Morison!'*

As MacCaig said it is a verse of vivid imagery. You can see the '*lichted ha*' and the ladies twirling through the dance and the last line, '*Ye are na Mary Morison,*' five ordinary words loaded with an enormous weight of feeling. Does that not sum up the genius of Burns? The ability to paint a picture, to express an emotion in words that could not be better chosen and that have as much resonance today as they did 200 years ago. The beauty of his poetry is everlasting. That is the foundation stone on which his popularity rests and the main reason why we have honoured his memory for over 200 years and may well continue to honour it for the next 200.

The founder members of Paisley Burns Club responded to the first Immortal Memory 200 hundred years ago on 29 January 1805. We continue that tradition tonight when I ask you to rise and join me in a toast to **THE IMMORTAL MEMORY OF ROBERT BURNS.**

Tom McCool  
President  
Paisley Burns Club  
25 January 2005.