

Mr Croupier, Honoured Guests, Fellow members of Paisley Burns Club,

Life has few inevitabilities - death and taxes are often quoted, but for members of Paisley Burns Club a significant one is assumption of the Presidency of the Club, and the opportunity to propose this toast on some January 25th. The only qualifications are the initial invitation to membership, and the ability, and the will, to keep breathing for the required number of years.

It's therefore obvious that each member has the task at some stage of his membership, of selecting a theme to be adopted when his turn comes.

A key challenge faced in this, the world's oldest Burns club, is how to make it different. Many of my illustrious predecessors have successfully married their professional or cultural interests with features of Burns life and works - Bob Saunders last year was one excellent example of this approach - but, unfortunately, I found that Burns recorded very little interest in either jazz trumpet or personal computers. And I'm sure you are all relieved to hear that I dismissed the idea of using the theme of "Accounting" ... on the grounds that you may have found this too exciting.

In this club we have over the years heard many erudite, well-researched and well-delivered toasts to the Immortal Memory, delivered by acknowledged experts in the field, and I could not aspire to add to their contributions covering Burns' life, and the astonishing range and amount of his work. Instead, I'd like to share with you this evening, the sense of wonder I've developed over many years at the extent of Burns influence how the beliefs, fears, inspirations, principles, values, and attitudes embodied in his work have affected others, particularly other great Scots, who have subsequently helped shape our country and indeed the world we live in.

Let me first explain how I got interested in this :

A dozen or so years ago, when I was starting a spell of working in the US, I thought I should find out something about the history and culture of the place. I trooped off to the local library in North Carolina, and got some books on the formation of the Union, the Civil War etc. and found a book by a great American hero John Muir, the pioneer conservationist, who created US national parks and had some 200 parks, trails, forests and lakes named after him. He even has his own day in the US calendar. I was stopped dead in my tracks as early as page 10 in Muir's first published book, when reading a paragraph describing a bush he encountered on his explorations of the mountains of Central California.

He ended his description thus " A multitude of birds and " wee, sleekit, cow'rin tim'rous beasties" find good homes in its deepest thickets" .

There was no mention of Burns in fact, the narrative carried on

with no explanation or further reference. As I read more of his work, I was to discover that Burnsian expressions were scattered throughout Muir's books and letters.

There was only one possible source of that description of mice. And further research revealed that this John Muir, so widely acknowledged as a pioneering hero in the USA, was in fact a Scotsman. He had been steeped in the poems of Robert Burns in his early childhood, and, throughout his life he acknowledged the influence that Burns' words and thoughts had on him. Only recently has Muir gained his rightful recognition in the country of his birth, but more of him later.

This experience provoked the thought :

There must be other great Scots who found their inspiration in the work of Burns. So, who are they?

In searching out Great Scots, I found near consensus in the many books with titles like " 101 Great Scots ", but only one attempt to *rank* them in order of greatness - effectively, to determine the top 20 . This was issued by the publishers of "Who's Who in Scotland" after surveying some 1500 of Scotland's movers and shakers, the great and good, who make up the subscription list and entries in "Who's Who".

This audience tonight will not be surprised to know that the runaway winner - # 1 - was our very own Robert Burns, but most of the top 20 were pre-18th century figures - people like Wallace, Bruce, Knox, King James the VIth etc. - who obviously could never have known of Burns. I've looked at the remainder, a mere handful, and found five who achieved international recognition as great men and who were happy to document their love of Burns' works.

The first of these is Andrew Carnegie, born in Dunfermline in 1835. Aged 12 he emigrated to the USA with his parents. He went on to create a massive business empire in railways, rolling-stock and steel production, but his greatness as a man is attributed mostly to the astonishing scale of his philanthropy. He amassed a fortune of \$ 500M in "1900" money - the richest man in the world, some said - before he undertook the massive task of giving it all away.

It is said that Carnegie could recite many of Burns poems before he could read or write and the very first penny he earned of that fortune was from his primary schoolmaster in Dunfermline when he recited - not read - Burns' " Man was made to Mourn" to the whole school - 11 x 8-line stanzas .

There are a number of themes in this poem which appear to have influenced the young man.

Of youth

O Man! while in thy early years,
How prodigal of time!

Mis-spending all thy precious hours,
Thy glorious, youthful prime!

Of brotherhood

And Man, whose heav'n-erected face
The smiles of love adorn,-
Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn

Of joblessness

See yonder poor, o'erlabour'd wight
So abject, mean, and vile
Who begs a brother of the earth
To give him leave to toil

Of independence

If I'm design'd yon lordling's slave-
By Nature's law design'd -
Why was an independent wish
E'er planted in my mind ?

When Carnegie was eight, his father had to look for work as weaving declined, and he later recalled, "it was burnt into my heart then that my father, though neither "abject, mean nor vile" as Burns has it, he had nevertheless to

" Beg a brother of the earth
To give him leave to toil"

And then and there came the resolve that I would cure that when I got to be a man"

An early biographer wrote "It is impossible to exaggerate the influence of the national poet on this particular worshipper. Burns remained Carnegie's favourite - and not just as a poet but as a philosopher, guide and mentor - all his life. As an adult, Carnegie was a voracious and wide-ranging reader, but his studies discovered few truths that his favourite bard had not enunciated or forecast. "

Carnegie himself wrote "I gloated over the gems of Burns like a Prince of India over his jewels"

And later Carnegie wrote, in explanation of his remarkable plan to disburse his half billion dollars :

" The day is not far distant when the man who dies leaving behind him millions of available wealth, which was free for him to administer during life, will pass away, "*unwept*", "*unhonored*" and "*unsung*", no matter to what uses he leaves the dross which he cannot take with him. Of such as these the public verdict will then be: "The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced"

This admirable sentiment, showing contempt for inherited wealth is expressed with quotation marks round the unusual wording of “ unwept”, “unhonored” and “unsung” . These are not words commonly used by the average multi-millionaire about to give away \$500M!! Professor Mackay’s splendid computer analysis of all of Burns’ poems and songs shows that Burns used each of these words, but only once and every case in the context of reputation after death. So we can safely conclude that Burns was Carnegie’s source. And also that Burns was a significant influence on Carnegie’s thinking.

The first - “unwept” was used by Burns in his stinging attack on Maria Riddell, after her public rebuke.

“If sorrow and anguish their exit await
From friendship and dearest affection remov’d
How doubly severer, Maria, thy fate!
Thou diedst unwept, as thou livedst unlov’d”

The second - “unhonored” - appears in Burns “Ode, Sacred to the memory of Mrs Oswald of Auchencruive “ . The said Mrs Oswald and her late husband had inherited and acquired wealth in a manner not entirely to Burns liking and this distaste boiled over into rage when Burns was forced to leave his lodging at Bailie Whighams Inn, Sanquhar on a wild January night to accommodate this lady’s funeral party. Immediately after riding a further 12 miles in these conditions, Burns penned his thoughts :

“Dweller in yon dungeon dark,
Hangman of creation, mark !
Who in widow-weeds appears,
Laden with unhonoured years.
Noosing with care a bursting purse,
Baited with many a deadly curse?

View the wither’d beldam’s face:
Can thy keen inspection trace
Aught of Humanity’s sweet, melting grace?
Note that eye, ‘tis rheum o’erflows
Pity’s flood there never rose.
See these hands, ne’er stretched to save,
Hands that took, but never gave.....

And are they of no more avail,
Ten thousand glittering pounds a year?
In other worlds, can Mammon fail,
Omnipotent as he is here?
O, bitter mockery of the pompous bier!

While down the wretch'd vital part is driven,
The cave-lodged beggar, with a conscience clear,
Expires in rags, unknown, and goes to Heaven.

The word "unsung" appears in "Elegy on the death of Sir James Hunter Blair", former Lord Provost of Edinburgh

"My patriot falls, but shall he lie unsung,
While empty greatness saves a worthless name?"

Carnegie subsequently financed the building of almost 3000 community libraries throughout the world, specifying only three main conditions :

1) Use of the libraries must be free of charge (a concept unknown at that time in the US)

2) The local authority must undertake to maintain the book stocks

3) A bust of Burns must be displayed in a prominent position

Interestingly, there was no stipulation that the name Carnegie should be in the library name.

The next great Scot in the poll was Sir Walter Scott, born in 1771 in Edinburgh, inventor of the historical novel.

He was said to be an equally significant figure to Burns in renewing the sense of Scottish nationhood.

In 1787 they met in Prof Ferguson's house in Edinburgh. Scott described Burns as

" the boast of Scotland"

"one of the most singular men by whose appearance our age has been distinguished"

"I had sense and feeling enough to be much interested in his poetry and would have given the world to know him"

Scott wrote in 1809

" This ardent and irritable temperament had its periods, not merely of tranquillity, but of the most subduing tenderness. In the society of men of taste he was eloquent, impressive and instructing. But it was in female circles that his powers of expression displayed their utmost fascination his conversation lost all its hardness, and often became so energetic and impressive, as to dissolve the whole circle into tears.

The traits of sensibility which, told of another, would sound like instances of gross affectation, were so native to the soul of this extraordinary man, and burst from him so involuntarily, that they not only obtained full credence as to the genuine feelings of his own heart, but melted into unthought-of sympathy all who witnessed them.

In such a mood, they were often called forth by the slightest and most trifling occurrences, an ordinary engraving, the wild turn of a simple Scottish air, a line in an old ballad, were, like " the field mouse's nest "

and “the upturned daisy”, sufficient to excite the sympathetic feelings of Burns. And it was wonderful to see those who, left to themselves, would have passed over such trivial circumstances without a moment’s reflection, sob over the picture, when its outline had been filled up by the magic art of his eloquence”.

He wrote in his Journal in 1826 :

I have always reckoned Burns and Byron the most genuine poetical geniuses of my time and half a century before me. We have however many men of high poetical talent, but none of that ever-gushing and perennial fountain of natural water.

And then :

Long life to thy fame and peace to thy soul, Rob Burns! When I want to express a sentiment which I feel strongly, I find a phrase in Shakespeare - or thee!

Scott was clearly much impressed by Burns !

The next great Scot in the Poll was James Clerk Maxwell , the physicist, who was born in Edinburgh in 1831. He specialised in electromagnetic theory, and is ranked not only with Albert Einstein, but by Einstein himself, who said that Maxwell’s work was “the most profound and the most fruitful that physics has experienced since the time of Newton”. His biographer and lifelong friend Lewis Campbell , wrote of him : “For in that constant soul, the impression, once made, was that which remained and went on deepening - “ as streams their channels deeper wear “ (*) .

(*)this is a quote from Burn’s “Thou Lingerin Star”,
Still o’er these scenes my memory wakes
And fondly broods with miser-care;
Time but th’ impression stronger makes
As streams their channels deeper wear

Campbell went on : -

I well remember with what feeling he once repeated to me the lines of Burns :

“ The Muse, nae poet evr fand her,
Till by himsel he learn’d to wander
Adown some trottin burn’s meander
An’ no think lang” (#)

(#) from Epistle to William Simpson (May 1785)

Maxwell was a voracious reader as a child, and developed a love for poetry which emerged throughout his academic life. His poetic works

were published in an 1882 edition of his biography, but later editions of the work sadly excluded the poetry. Some of his work was published under a pseudonym in the form of an algebraic formula :

$$\frac{dp}{dt}$$

which, most of you will know, is the analytical equivalent, of the thermodynamic formula. J.C.M. - James Clerk Maxwell.

Maxwell wrote the following two poems, as valedictory addresses to colleagues :

Could there be any doubt about the source of his inspiration ?? Firstly
To the departing Dean, one John A Frere

“John Alexander Frere, John
When we were first acquaint
You lectured us as Freshmen
In the holy term of Lent.
But now you’re getting bald, John
Your end is drawing near
And I think we’d better say “Goodbye”
John Alexander Frere”

Or to another departing colleague, Edward Wilson (neatly including some references to their common experiences in physics)

“Gin a body meet a body
Flyin’ through the air.
Gin a body, hit a body
Will it fly? And where?
Ilka impact has its measure
Ne’er a ane hae I,
Yet a’ the lads they measure me,
Or, at least, they try !

This was an introduction to his idea of combining his poetic and academic interests, which he went on to develop to the point where he presented complex mathematical problems and their solutions in verse ! One of his simpler compositions, addressing the phenomenon of echoes - “Reflections from various surfaces” contains this splendid passage:

“By the hollow mountain side
Questions strange I shout forever
While the echoes far and wide
Seem to mock my vain endeavour
Still I shout, for though they never
Cast my borrowed voice aside
Words from empty words they sever
Words of Truth from words of Pride”

Lewis Campbell, in 1882 (3 years after his death) attributed his genius in equal part to scientific industry, philosophic insight and poetic feeling - a feeling engendered by an early love of Burns

Since Sir Alexander Fleming, the great pioneer of penicillin, was born in Darvel, Ayrshire and educated at Kilmarnock Academy, there is no doubt that the works of Burns would feature on the curriculum. While there is no record of Fleming's interest in Burns in his earlier life, this is not really surprising since he had the reputation of being very dour and taciturn the strong silent type !!

In conversation he had a habit of staring intently at the speaker, then turning away without a word. One colleague said that trying to converse with Fleming was "like playing tennis with a man who, when he receives a service, puts the ball in his pocket". Yet this same man, in later life made public speeches when accepting his many honours and accolades. Here he frequently praised Burns, and held him up as a role model, while lecturing on the theme of SUCCESS in life : for instance, he said

Burns, who never earned more than £50 per year, has gained universal immortality while millionaires and rulers of nations are forgotten.

"It seems rather a pity that some politicians are not disciples of Robert Burns. Some of them have had wordly success, some have amassed fortunes but Burns lives on and they will be forgotten"
"Robert Burns has been the man, who, perhaps more than any other, has helped to bind Scotsmen together".

And now back to where we started with one of my own heroes, John Muir.

Muir was born in Dunbar in 1838 and emigrated to Wisconsin aged 11. He became the world's first ecologist, before the word was invented, uniquely combining for the first time knowledge of geology, geography, botany and biology.

His biographer writes "His intellectual heroes included various Scots: the naturalist Alexander Wilson, and the writers Robert Burns, James Hogg and Walter Scott. Burns in particular gave Muir a profound respect for the democratic intellect and an utter disregard for matters of class, political power or social position."

Muir was the pioneer of America's National Parks, and his conservation campaign was pitched against the flood-tide of rampant capitalism in the form of timber, mining, oil and railroad interests.

He walked thousands of miles through the US wilderness, armed only with two books - The New Testament and "The poems and songs of

Robert Burns” . Like Burns, he was a prolific letter writer, to the extent in one case of persuading the then President, Teddy Roosevelt to join him for a weeks walking and camping in Yosemite, as he campaigned to gain protected status for some of that country’s finest scenery. That same Teddy Roosevelt wrote at Muir’s death :

“he was able to influence contemporary thought and action on the subjects to which he devoted his life..... Our generation owes much to John Muir”

In 1869 (Feb) he wrote of his visit to the California Sierra

“ I was singing bits of Highland Mary, oft repeating the lines :-

“There simmer first unfaulds her robes
And there they longest tarry”

Muir wrote in his journal, on January 25th, 1906 :

“It is surely a fine thing to stop now and then in the throng of our common everyday tasks to contemplate the works and ways of God’s great men, sent down from time to time to guide and bless mankind. And it is glorious to know that one of the greatest men who appeared in the 18th century was a Scotsman, Robert Burns.

..His lessons of divine love and sympathy to humanity, which he preached in his poems and sent forth white-hot from his heart, have gone ringing and singing around the globe, stirring the heart of every nation and race. And yet what a hard , sad life he had in his own Scotland. But in the midst of it all, he knew something of the worth of his short life’s work when lying in the shadow of death, he said to his despairing wife, “ Jean, I’ll be more thought of, a hundred years after this than I am now” How gloriously this prophecy has been fulfilled! And this marvellous ever-growing devotion is perfectly natural. Could Burns have seen it , how glad he would have been! What is the secret of it all ? It is his inspiring genius derived from heaven, glowing with all-embracing sympathy. The man of science, the naturalist, too often loses sight of the essential oneness of all living things..... while the eye of the Poet, the Seer, never closes on the kinship of all God’s creatures, and his heart ever beats in sympathy with great and small alike as “earth-born companions and fellow mortals” equally dependent on Heaven’s eternal love. One calls to mind his field mouse; the tender pity for silly sheep and cattle, and ilk hoppin’ bird, ”wee helpless thing” shelterless in a winter snowstorm; the wounded hare crying like a child; the unfortunate daisy, “wee, modest, crimson-tipped flower”, crushed amang the stoure. He extended pity and sympathy even to the deil, entering into his feelings and hoping he might perhaps be able to repent and escape from his gloomy den. (Muir then goes on to quote two verses from Address to the Deil)

“Hear me, Auld Hangie, for a wee
An let poor damned bodies be;
I’m sure sma’ pleasure it can gie,
Ev’n to a deil,
To skelp and scaud poor dogs like me
An’ hear us squeel

But fare-you-weel, Auld Nickie-Ben!
O’wad ye tak a thought an’ men’!
Ye aiblins might - I dinna ken-
Still hae a stake:
I’m wae to think upo’ yon den,
Ev’n for your sake! “

Muir continued:

..... On my lonely walks I have often thought how fine it would be to have the company of Burns. And indeed he was always with me for I had him in my heart. On my first long walk from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico (More than 1000 miles) I carried a copy of Burns’ poems and sang them all the way. The whole country and the people , beasts and birds seem to like them

Throughout these last hundred and ten years, thousands of good men have been telling God’s love; but the man who has done most to warm human hearts and bring to light the kinship of the world is Burns, Robert Burns the Scotsman. “

After 60 years in US, Muir still spoke and wrote in broad, vernacular Scots

So, what do we have in these 5 greatest of great Scots? Just a few individuals who:

Created the US steel industry and introduced free library access to millions

Saved millions of lives through antibiotics

Created an ecology movement throughout the world

Advanced man’s knowledge of science

Successfully introduced millions to the literary form of the historical novel

And all influenced by a man whose assets at his early death amounted to thoughts on paper.

If that was all Burns had achieved, that would be impressive enough.

Of course, it’s impressive that such a high proportion of Scotland’s greatest have been positively influenced by Burns.

Of course, it’s impressive that, while all these widely educated individuals did not have him as their sole influence, he was the one influence they had in common.

But what's more impressive, is the probability that, with this high degree of influence at the tip, the iceberg of not-quite-so-great Scots all the way down to ordinary Scots is likely to contain many individuals whose lives have been have been influenced for the better by Burns' work.

And why just Scots ?? With more than 2000 editions of his work, in more than 50 languages, produced since his death, this pattern will surely be reflected beyond Scotland.

And there is more than just a past tense to this story with world-wide communication opening up possibilities even Burns could never have imagined the opportunities for Burns to be a very positive force for mankind will continue to grow.

More thought of a hundred years after his death ? Certainly !! And hundreds of years yet !!

Gentlemen, please join me in the toast. The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns