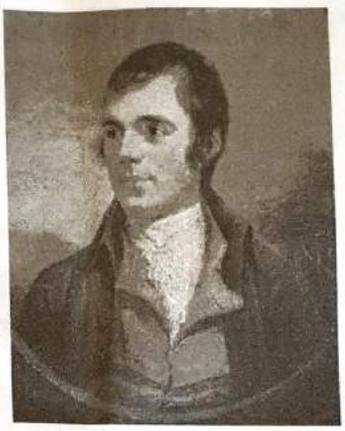
ALMERIMAR BURNS SUPPER: THE IMMORTAL MEMORY

ALASTAIR STEWART

JANUARY 2019



Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to propose the toast of The Immortal Memory tonight. At the danger of sounding self-absorbed, it would be remiss of me not to mention from the outset that this week was my 31st birthday.

I tell you this for a singularly important reason to me. My grandfather, Jim Wilson, was a great admirer of Robert Burns and delivered many an Immortal Memory himself. As such, and when learning that he had a grandchild on the way, he lived in worry for months that his cherished Burns Suppers were in danger of being supplanted with children's birthday parties!

While I have no doubt he'd have attended them with love and glee, my mother and grandmother remind me every year of how close I cut my arrival on the 24th!

With deep regret, he passed six months before I was born, but it's with great delight that I get to speak to you tonight with his memory, his immortal memory, in mind, too.

Tonight, I would like to focus on two key features of Burns' life and work. Firstly, Burns' humanity and how it's in danger of being decontextualised by a wave of fresh of detractors. Secondly, what would Burns have made of Brexit, and could he have understood it?

To begin with, it's become common practice these days to double take on historical figures and their association with events and gatherings such as these. Burns is an easy target for revisionist hawks because he is as venerated as any literary figure who walked the earth. England has no Shakespeare Suppers nor Italy a Dante Dinner, and Burns is first among equals.

For many Burns endures as something of a picaresque figure, a cad, and a bit of a bounder, with an eye for the ladies and a penchant for drink. The poet Liz Lochhead has even called Burns a "sex pest". In the age of #MeToo, it's fashionable to assume the worst of our more famous authors and poets. Burns, however, does invite a bit of trouble himself, and he never shied away from discussing the pleasures of life.

In 1780 he established the **Tarbolton Bachelor's Club** with his brother and an assortment of local lads. The club was founded as a "diversion to relieve the wearied man worn down by the necessary labours of life". Its constitution was unambiguous:

> *"Every man proper for a member of this Society, must have a frank, honest, open heart; above anything dirty or mean; and must be a professed lover of one or more of the female sex. No haughty, self-conceited person, who looks upon himself as superior to the rest of the Club, and especially no mean*

spirited, worldly mortal, whose only will is to heap up money shall upon any pretense whatever be admitted."

Unsurprisingly, young master Burns was elected as its first president at the tender age of 21.

Burns may have outraged a new generation of overly sensitive detractors, but at his heart, there's a duality which isn't mutually exclusive: He had had an eye for the ladies, for certain, but he was also among the first pioneers of social commentary in Scotland. It borders on slander and the hyper-cautious to present Burns as having anything less than the utmost respect for women. In his poem **'The Rights of Women'**, published in 1792, Burns declared that:

"While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,
The fate of empires and the fall of kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention."

He was a womanizer, granted, but no misogynist. Long before the suffragettes and women's liberation and even before what we'd call human rights, there was Rabbie Burns championing the women when most remember the 'rights of man'.

It is a common thread throughout his life to be moved by the plight of those less fortunate. Who can blame him, when he lived in an age of exceptional poverty and to which he himself was a frequent victim. One struggles to think of a poet who was more modest in his appreciation for the capriciousness of life's fortunes.

Burns, after all, died wretchedly poor, in debt, and shunned and neglected. His life's woes are our lives woes and it's not too difficult to see that as the

primary reason, beyond composure or style, why he has endured in the hearts of Scots. As he wrote '**For a' That and a' That'**, published in n 1795:

"What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hodden grey, an' a that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;
A Man's a Man for a' that:
For a' that, and a' that,
Their tinsel show, an' a' that;
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that."

The dead can offer no defence, and we must seriously warn against Burns, and evening's such as these by proxy, being retired as taboo or controversial.

Part of the difficulty in this task is the inconsistency at the root of Burns. The same issue exists for the critics and acolytes of William Shakespeare and Winston Churchill. Over their long lives, they simply changed their opinions on a plethora of topics. This, unfortunately, provides ammunition to those who take an evolution of opinion as a weakness or a drawback.

Burns, for example, is often classified as a so-called pioneer of the Romantic movement, but an indulgent emphasis on his emotional character overlooks his idealistic and polemical skills matched only by a fiery intolerance of injustice. Burns was from the romantic era, but he wasn't a romantic writer.

Lord Byron or William Wordsworth or any of his contemporaries lack the hard biting social commentator that forms Burns work and nowhere is this better illuminated than his confusing and downright contradictory views on Scottish and British nationalism.

One perfunctory Google search for the words 'Burns and Scotland' and 'Burns and Britain' yield too sizeable camps who both claim him as one of

their own. That he's fought over as a poster boy over 220 years after his death is indicative of the special place Burns and his ideas occupy in the lexicon of Scottish public life.

Burns was appalled by the manner in which Scots lost their nationhood in 1707 when the Scottish Parliament agreed to Union with England. He was not alone in attributing the Acts of Union to a selfish Scottish aristocracy and English bribes. His feelings about these 'bribes' are made very clear in his poem **'Such A Parcel Of Rogues In A Nation'** written in 1791.

"Fareweel to a' our Scottish fame,
Fareweel our ancient glory;
Fareweel ev'n to the Scottish name,
Sae fam'd in martial story.
Now Sark rins over Solway sands,
An' Tweed rins to the ocean,
To mark where England's province stands-
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!

O would, or I had seen the day
That Treason thus could sell us,
My auld grey head had lien in clay,
Wi' Bruce and loyal Wallace!
But pith and power, till my last hour,
I'll mak this declaration;
We're bought and sold for English gold-
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!"

You'd be well forgiven for thinking that was the beginning and end of the subject. The only problem is the litany of contradictory remarks. The poem **'The Dumfries Volunteers'**, also known as **'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?'** is a stirring piece of British patriotism.

To compound the issue, it also has a little bit of Burns's "a man's a man" attitude added in at the end. For Burns, there is no inconsistency with being both for the Monarchy and for the People, for Britain and for Scotland, and all one at the same time. It includes a verse which pretty much says it all:

"Be Britain still to Britain true,
Among ourselves united;
For never but by British hands
Must British wrongs be righted!"

There's a bit of a secret in his correspondence, away from his poetry. Referring to the **"revolution" of 1688, Burns wrote to Robert Graham, of Fintry, in 1792 saying:**

"To the British Constitution, on revolution principles, next after my God, I am most devoutly attached."

In another letter to Graham in January, 1793 he wrote:

"I look upon the British Constitution, as settled at the [Glorious] Revolution, to be the most glorious on earth, or that perhaps the wit of man can frame; at the same time, I think, not alone, that we have a good deal deviated from the original principles of that Constitution, - particularly, that an alarming system of corruption has pervaded the connection between the Executive and the House of Commons.."

Can we detect another problem with Burns, the seeming supremacy of the British system with the internationalism at the heart of his work? **In a letter to John Francis Erskine, written from Dumfries in 1793, he wrote:**

"In my defence to their accusations, I said, that whatever might be my sentiments of republics, ancient or modern, as to Britain, I abjured the idea:- That a constitution, which, in its original principles, experience had proved to

be every way fitted for our happiness in society, it would be insanity to sacrifice to an untried visionary theory."

In the same letter, he speaks of himself in the third person as having an:

"...independent British mind" and of his children as "the little independent Britons, in whose veins runs my own blood".

Burns' humanity is clear in his song **'A Man's a Man For a' that'.** He castigates love of rank, money and 'tinsel', 'birkies' even though they may be called 'Lords', and extolls honest poverty, "The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor, Is king o' men for a' that."Inspired by the French Revolution, the poem ends in a forecast of universal brotherhood:

"Then let us pray that come it may,
(As come it will for a' that,)
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth,
Shall bear the gree, an' a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's coming yet for a' that,
That Man to Man, the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that."

It is impossible to imagine a man like Burns embarking or condoning any course that could, or will, see people worse off. He was a radical, to be certain, but he hated pomp, circumstance, hypocrisy and fundamentalists and while he was a Scottish patriot, he was no parochial nationalist and certainly no jingoistic militarist. In a **'Thanksgiving For A National Victory'**, written in 1793, he rails against powerful hypocrites in a stanza that remains relevant today:

"Ye hypocrites! are these your pranks?
To murder men and give God thanks!

Desist, for shame!-proceed no further;
God won't accept your thanks for Murther!"

If there's a commonality to each of these opposing pieces, it's in their radicalism. Burns lived in a time of reform, and the dramatic rise and fall of a movement for parliamentary reform that directly involved the common people of Scotland in politics for the first time. Burns was committed to democracy and social equality.

Tyrannical government was the object of American and European revolutionaries in his lifetime and 'liberty' in the 17th and 18th-century was a radical word. **'Scots Wha Hae'**, written in 1793, is full of that radicalism and unequivocal belief in freedom:

"Tyrants fall in every foe! Liberty's in every blow! Let us do – or die!"

There are other songs and poems of the period, such as **'The Tree of Liberty', 'The Dagger', 'Ode for General Washington's Birthday' and 'The Dean of the Faculty'** which add to this theme but never articulate Burns' feeling so well, and so succinctly, than in a **'A Man's a Man for a' That"** in 1795. It was a time of significant opposition to reform, particularly from Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, but Burns never gives up his optimism about the future.

There is no definitive answer to whether Burns would have supported Brexit, and I would expect nothing less. The application of old views to modern dilemmas is a treacherous game, but I will say this: Burns had too much respect for humanity, too much an appreciation for the dangers of tyranny to deny the rights of people to vote, as many times as they like, on nothing less than their future. He knew tyrants when he saw them and understood that the worst of them are wrapped up in the most official laurels of state. Humanity is that which we all share, and no number of state barriers can break that universal bond of brother and sisterhood.

Whatever one thinks of Burns and his views, I stand before you guilty of the same decontextualisation for what I've condemned others. If there's a lesson or an excuse, it's that Burns is a relevant, treasured and coveted ally for modern causes. That in itself is a testament to the scope and range of his thinking and the ubiquity and timelessness of the decency, courage and respect so seeded into his body of work.

As the man himself advises in **To A Louse** in 1786:

"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!"

I've no doubt that Burns would have enjoyed the good fellowship and jolly spirits of this evening, and the inevitable discussion that would have followed of matters past and present.

As a Scot, I am very proud to give you this toast. It is a toast which we should all drink with joy and with pride.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I invite you to join with me in the toast, 'To The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns'.