

## **The Immortal Memory: Befriending Robert Burns**

I am delighted to be here tonight, to celebrate the **Immortal Memory** of Robert Burns, in such **convivial, distinguished**, company.

I am very **pleased** to have the **opportunity** to **appreciate** Burns with the Dumfries & Galloway **Befriending** Project, which makes such a **difference** to people across this **region**. The aims of **Befriending**, of ‘enriching young lives through offering **friendship, consistency, empathy** and **diverse experiences**’, seem particularly **compatible** with a consideration of Burns’s life and work.

In celebrating the **Immortal Memory** of this **great poet**, songwriter and **scholar**, rather than taking the **obvious route** of listing his many **achievements**, I want to reflect on **own** experience of **befriending Burns**. I’d like to suggest why I think his memory should be **immortal**, both to us as **individuals** and to our **wider community**, and invite you to think about what Burns means to **you**, at a personal level.

I should **confess** at the **outset** that my **literary** relationship with Burns did **not** get off to a **good start**. I was, initially, a **reluctant acquaintance**. I neither exhibited, nor **strove towards, empathy** for Burns, and I was **inconsistent** in my feelings for him. When I started publishing on **Scottish literature**, in my **20s**, I was **arrogant** enough to think I knew **better** than to **waste** time and **energy** on Burns. I felt strongly that **Burns** and, to a **lesser** extent Scott, overshadowed **many** important, '**lesser**' Scottish writers. I wanted to speak up for the **undervalued** and the **unappreciated**. I **still** hold that position to **some extent**—although not, **now**, to the **exclusion** of Burns.

As a **critic**, I have always preferred **underdogs**, particularly those who, unlike **myself**, have not enjoyed a formal **education** and so had to fight **hard** to be recognised by those who enjoy **advantages** in life. I suppose, to **that** extent, I was predisposed to **liking** Burns. However, I preferred **lesser known** poets like the 'Scotch Milkmaid', Janet Little, born the same year as Burns at Nether Bogside, by

Ecclefechan. She worked as head dairymaid at **Loudon** castle, sharing a patron with Burns in Mrs **Dunlop**. Despite some **shared experiences**, Burns was **not** a particular friend to Little. He had **heard** of her, and ‘always to the honour of her character’ but refused to promote her work. Little, in turn, wrote **scathingly** of critics who could tolerate a ‘lesson to the heart’ from a ‘ploughman’ but not a ‘rustic country quean’: ‘A **milk maid** poem books to print; / Mair fit she wad her dairy tent’. Then there was James Hogg, the Ettrick shepherd, who considered himself a writer in direct descent from Burns. His poetry was far more palatable to my own **taste**. Burns, from **my** point of view **then** was too much of a **celebrity poet** to deserve **friendship**; Little and Hogg were more **my** kind of writers.

**What**, more to the **point**, was there **left** to **say** about Burns?

I soon had to **find out**. When I came to live in **Dumfries** in 1999, as one of the first five lecturers appointed by **Glasgow University** at the Crichton, I was often asked to **speak** about Burns. In my **talks**, I

would make an assiduous point of saying **something** about Burns and then moving swiftly **off topic**, to speak up for those other, **neglected** poets, like those I've mentioned. This must have been **extremely irritating** for those who were expecting to hear about Burns, both as a **friend** and **poetic** icon. If I offended, or at least **annoyed**, anyone here **tonight**, please accept my apology **now**.

It was an exciting time though—for Scotland as well as for me—with the new **Scottish parliament**. The work of Burns seemed so well **tuned** to this development. I remember interviewing various people a couple of years later, to write a piece about the performance of 'A Man's A Man' by Sheena Wellington on the occasion of the opening of the parliament. **She** felt its significance for folk **music** as well as politically, and recalled a remark from Dalbeattie resident Phyllis Martin, who appreciated 'somebody ordinary' singing then. Sheena understood this to mean, '**I had done the biz for the music in the feeling of my peers, as it were, [which] was great'**.

With such **high-level** recommendations it felt, at times, as if I was being **shoved** towards Burns, by my work, my **place** and, arguably, by **fate**. At that time I was becoming interested in other South West writers, particularly **James Barke**, so I approached Luath Press about editing his ‘Immortal Memory’ series for publication in 2009. They said yes but, unfortunately for me, **Alan Taylor** had the same idea.

Luath suggested that, **instead**, I should edit a new edition of Burns’s *Merry Muses of Caledonia*. Engaging with these **bawdy** texts gave me a new **insight** into Burns as a **holistic** writer, who celebrated **poetry and song** in whatever form. Partly, this was a **pose**. In circulating **erotic material**, in **manuscript**, to trusted friends—Provost Maxwell of Lochmaben, or John M<sup>c</sup>Murdo of Drumlanrig. Burns sought to **flatter**—he hinted at their broad-mindedness. Equally, he showcased himself a **gentleman collector of risqué materials**; worthy of **befriending** by self-styled social superiors.

The songs of the *Merry Muses* made me think of Burns, perhaps paradoxically, more **kindly**. They represent the worldview of the eighteenth century drinking club. They are a relatively **tame** group of texts, **playfully** designed for consumption by men. They have their own characteristics, for instance they highly rhythmic, reflecting the **actions** they describe, and use easily-understood **euphemisms**.

There is the statement, for instance, in ‘Ye Hae Lien Wrang Lassie’, ‘Ye’ve let the pounie o’er the dyke, / And he’s been in the corn, lassie’. **That** song is still one of my **favourites**, taking an **empathetic** view to the **still-relevant** topic of **unexpected teenage pregnancy**.

Having learnt to appreciate Burns’s **worldiness**, I came to a better understanding of his **skill** as a **collector** of traditional songs, and of his contributions to the tradition. I built a **stronger** friendship with the poet, and felt comfortable participating in the **first** Homecoming Year in 2009, where conferences and gatherings throughout the

world welcomed his **international community of admirers**. I must credit, too, my long-standing **friendship** with **Gerry Carruthers**, co-director of Glasgow University's **Centre for Robert Burns Studies**, and with **senior scholars** like the late **Ross Roy** and the still living **Robert Crawford**. The community of **friendship** around Burns **appreciation**, as we see tonight, **itself** deserves **appreciation**. In short, **I've** come to rethink my previous opinions about Burns for what they were: **plain stupid**. To make **amends**, I offer my **hand now**, with a touch of embarrassment, to Burns—**his** was always **outstretched in friendship**.

I **appreciate** that Burns's work—as a poet, song writer, and collector—is, quite simply, **magnificent**. His memory **fully deserves** to be **immortal**. For one thing, he is a **chameleon** in his writing. We can take the **experiences** that we **want** from Burns's work, much as we can from a **good friendship**. His poetry is, in many ways, almost **interactive**, full of **universal** meanings, of value as **individuals**.

There is the love of **fair play**, delivered with a light hand in ‘**The Rights of Woman**—spoken by Miss Fontenelle on her benefit night’ here in Dumfries in 1792: ‘While Europe’s eye is fixed on mighty things, / The Fate of Empires and the fall of Kings; [...] Amid this mighty fuss, just let me mention, / **The Rights of Woman** merit some attention’. So, too, in ‘Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn’, written a year later, Burns dismisses the ‘Chains and Slaverie’ of former times, praising ‘**Freedom’s sword**’ and the right to ‘**FREE-MAN** stand, or **FREE-Man fa**’, rejecting the ‘Oppression’ of ‘Tyrants’ in favour of ‘**LIBERTY**’.

This is not to say that Burns’s work can, or **should**, be reduced to simple **sound bites** or viewed through **superficial** and **casual acquaintance**. **Some** people want to **do** this. Around the 25<sup>th</sup> of January **this** year, for instance, I was approached by a TV programme which was theming their Burns night slot around the **referendum**.

They had, the researcher told me, found someone to argue that Burns was a **nationalist**—would I be prepared to take the **other side** and discuss him as a **unionist**? I said **no**, largely because I don't **see** Burns can be classed as either one or the **other**.

**Burns's opinions** are, from a twenty first century perspective, much harder to pin down—partly because he kept his **cards** so close to his **vulnerable chest**. He has to be seen in his late eighteenth-century context, almost a **hundred years** after the Union of the Parliaments, and living through the **changing** times of the French revolution, from the late 1780s onwards. If anything, he **might** be described as what Grassic Gibbon termed a '**cosmopolitan**': **international** in his interests and **eclectic** in his politics, open to exploring **new ideas** rather than to **party agendas**. To use another twentieth century quote, just as **Hugh MacDiarmid** said of himself, echoing **Walt Whitman**, Burns could equally be described as containing 'multitudes'. He is what Kenneth Simpson called a '**Protean Scot**'.

Burns is at once the poet who celebrated an international, almost **proto-communist** vision in ‘**A Man’s A Man**’, as well as being the ‘company man’ treating his life in an implicitly self-deprecating way in 1792 in ‘The De’il’s awa wi’ th’Exciseman’. He is the self-proclaimed and proud ‘**Fornicator**’, but he is also the **sentimental** writer of ‘A Red, red rose’ and his own, **sanitised** ‘John Anderson’. The **scholarly** song collector, who made such an impact in the *Scots Musical Museum* enterprise is also the man of the ‘Sabine Rape’ incident at Friars Carse in 1793.

I’ve talked at length about how I came to know Burns, centuries after his death, and I’ll close with a few remarks on the **privileged people** who **met** him and remembered him **first hand**. In his *Life of Robert Burns* the Nithsdale poet and stonemason Allan Cunningham, who shared Burns’s **enthusiasm** for the songs and cultural traditions of South West Scotland, expressed a real **empathetic affinity**. As a

child, Cunningham heard the first public reading of ‘Tam O’Shanter’, at his father’s home at Sandbed, by Ellisland. He wrote of Burns’s in Nithsdale as a happy combination of ‘**ready materials for song: hills with fine woods, vales with clear waters**’ as well as ‘**dames as lovely as any recorded in verse**’ and ‘**characters, in whose faces originality was legibly written**’. Cunningham states that:

[Burns] did not limit himself to the charms of those whom he could step out to the walks and admire: his lyrics give evidence of **the wandering of his thoughts to the distant or the dead** [...] to the **charms of lasses** with golden or with flaxen locks [...] The poet’s favourite walk in composing his songs was on a beautiful **green sward** on the **northern side of the Nith**, opposite Lincluden; and his favourite **posture** for composition at home was balancing himself on the hind-legs of his arm-chair.

In his fellow poet, Cunningham recognised an awareness of a community of **Nithsdale people** which stretched from the past to the present and linked tradition and place into a very special whole.

Burns had a very **special relationship** with this area, and its folk, celebrated explicitly in works like '**The Banks of the Nith**':

How **lovely**, Nith, thy fruitful vales,  
Where bounding hawthorns gaily bloom [...]  
May there my latest hours consume,  
**Amang the friends of early days!**

We should never **apologise**, then, for claiming Burns for **Dumfriesshire**, despite his **Ayrshire** origins. He felt a genuine **affection** for this place and its people, as special, supportive, and affectionate: as a set, in other words, of **empathetic friends**. There is plenty of evidence of his wider **regional befriending**. In a letter of

June 1794, Burns praised the ‘charmingly romantic & picturesque’ scenery around Dumfries. More than that, he expressed his appreciation for the ‘honest men & bonie lasses’ he knew in this ‘**deserving & enchanting** part of the kingdom’.

Burns’ Dumfriesshire is a place of **genuine values**: of honest people, and of enduring moral—in a human sense—engagement. It sometimes seems to me that, like J.M. Barrie (who described his time in Dumfries as ‘the happiest years of my life’) that despite the **anxieties** that afflicted him, and the **ill health** he suffered during his last years here, he found a **peculiarly sustaining** set of friendships among Nithsdale and Dumfriesshire folk.

This is the region where he met ‘**gowden-locked** Anna’ of the *Globe* (1790) but it is also where he engaged in happy **family life**. At the house on what is now Burns street, he found peace with Jean Armour, who survived him until 1834. This **special woman** kept **alive**

his immortal memory in a very **direct** and **personal** way for many people who knew and visited her, as a **living link** to Burns. Prior to their marriage, Burns had shown **unkindness** to Armour, as in the infamous letter to Agnes Maclehose, highlighting Armour's 'vulgarity of soul'. After they wed, he was uniform in his **praise** for Jean, describing her as having 'the handsomest figure, the **sweetest temper**, the soundest constitution, and **kindest heart** in the country',

Burns especially appreciated Jean's singing voice, 'the finest "**wood-note wild**" you ever heard'. Songs like 'It is na, Jean, thy bonnie face' hints at a shared love that went beyond the **physical**: 'Something in ilka part o' thee / To praise, to love, I find, / But dear as is thy form to me, / Still dearer is **thy mind**'. An early, passionate attachment developed into a close, affectionate, and mutually nurturing relationship. Jean's memory deserves celebration alongside the **immortal** one of her husband.

To conclude, **Befriending Burns**, I think, takes **energy, time and commitment**. To understand Burns's **work**, specifically requires the qualities of '**consistency**' and openness to '**diverse experiences**' that **Befriending** promotes. I hope my talk tonight encourages you to reflect on your **own history of befriending Burns** and to think about **why he matters in your life**, as well as to **Scotland**, and to **the world**. **For his compassion**, awareness of community, relationships with **others** and, above **all**, his invitation to **literary friendship**, can I invite you, **now**, to **raise your glass**, to **the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns**.