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 McMurdo 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 25th 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.