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## Robert Burns & Ferenc Puskás: for the Love of Football & Poetry

Craig Lamont

Football is undeniably the most popular sport in Scotland. Rugby and golf are widely enjoyed, but for the sake of this short piece we can assume football as the national sport. Robert Burns is Scotland's national poet. This is also undeniable. But how does the legacy of Burns, an eighteenth-century farmer and poetic genius, connect with that of the Hungarian Ferenc Puskás, 'the greatest goalscorer of the 20th century'? The story of this plaque involves the enduring fame of Burns, Puskás, and Sir Alex Ferguson. Like any plaque, the intention is to mark, commemorate, and suggest remembrance of one or more things. Burns has a wide and global cultural memory, as is evident by the presence of statues, busts, and other markers in honour of Burns around the world. Puskás is certainly revered in the footballing world, and although he does not reach the heights of Burns in a cultural sense, there are similarities to be drawn in his legacy. There are statues, stadia, and streets named after Puskás, mostly in Budapest but with some material legacy in Melbourne, Australia, where he worked as a manager. In both cases, these remnants of cultural memory encapsulate more than the path tread by Burns or Puskás. This leads us to Hampden, where the two are now interlinked.

Puskás first played at Hampden on 8 December 1954, when he led Hungary to a 4-2 win against Scotland. He failed to score on this occasion, but in his post-match interview he described Hampden 'the most magnificent stadium I have ever seen, the life and essence of football.'<sup>1</sup> This game took place just months after Puskás captained Hungary in the World Cup Final of 1954, scoring the first goal, but they were beaten 3-2 by West Germany.

Puskás returned to Hampden on 18 May 1960 for the European Cup Final. Having spent 13 years playing with Budapest Honvéd, Puskás signed for Real Madrid in 1958. As now, Real Madrid were the premier team in Europe. They won five consecutive European Cups, beginning with the inaugural final in 1956 and ending with the match at Hampden in 1960. There were over 127,000 spectators in attendance, including Ferguson. The score was 7-3 to Real Madrid, with Puskás scoring four. Ferguson also recalls Puskás scoring against Rangers in the European Cup of 1962-3, with Real Madrid winning 1-0 at Ibrox.<sup>2</sup> Real Madrid went on to win the second leg against Rangers by 6 goals to nil. Puskás scored a hat-trick.

With Puskás, it is easy to get carried away. His astonishing scoring records for club and country remain famous: 358 goals in 350 games for Honvéd, 242 goals in 262 games for Real Madrid, and 84 goals scored in his 85 appearances for Hungary.<sup>3</sup> He is also noted as having an influence on current Celtic manager Angelos – or Ange – Postecoglou, who was coached by Puskás at South Melbourne FC (then named South Melbourne Hellas). But where does Robert Burns come into this?

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Football Museum page: <https://scottishfootballmuseum.org.uk/resources/news/ferenc-pusk%C3%A1s-nobody%E2%80%99s-fool/> (accessed 29 November 2022)

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Mail* 17 November 2006: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-417060/Fergie-III-forget-Puskas-display-Hampden-Park.html> (accessed 29 November 2022)

<sup>3</sup> Goal.com (<https://www.goal.com/en-gb/news/real-madrid-all-time-top-scorers-cristiano-ronaldo-karim-benzema/b1t433e4e61a1fc85ee>) and Planetsport (<https://www.planetsport.com/soccer/news/who-are-top-10-goalscorers-all-time-cristiano-ronaldo-pele-lionel-messi-romario-bican>) (accessed 29 November 2022).

In 1998 the Hungarian Scottish Society had their first Burns Supper, and in 2005 Zoltán Magyar founded the Robert Burns International Foundation (RBIF). The Foundation is dedicated to helping sick and underprivileged children in Hungary and Central Europe. That they commemorate and honour Burns with their name is arguably one of the most remarkable tributes to our poet, whose humanity and universal appeal has been celebrated across Europe for centuries.

Traditional Burns Suppers on the continent can be pinpointed using the Interactive Map of Burns Suppers, developed in 2020 by Dr Paul Malgrati and Mr Brian Aitken, for a project on the Burns Supper led by Prof Gerard Carruthers.<sup>4</sup> The 'Annual Celebration of Robert Burns International Foundation', dating back to 2004 at the Corinthia Hotel, can be located on this map.

But, back to football. On 23 January 2007, Ferguson agreed to take up the role of Honorary President of the RBIF. He noted his pride for Scotland and Burns, saying that he 'wanted to spread the fame of Scotland's national bard', and the 'exceptional' work of the Foundation.<sup>5</sup> Since then, Ferguson has been involved in presenting the Ferenc Puskás–Sir Alex Ferguson Sponsor of the Year Trophy, in recognition of the generosity of those companies who contribute to the work of the Foundation. There is also, of course, the FIFA Puskás award, inaugurated in 2009, given to the player who scored the most aesthetically pleasing goal that year. In this sense, aesthetics is another feature shared in poetry and in football.

And finally to 2015, and the unveiling of the plaque at Hampden in the Scottish Football Museum on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the match in which Puskás scored four goals to give Real Madrid their fifth consecutive European Cup. In attendance was György Szöllösi, a leading journalist, with his book *Puskas: Madrid, Magyars and the Amazing Adventures of the World's Greatest Goalscorer* (Glasgow: Freight, 2015). The plaque is pictured below, with the English-language dedication transcribed:

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Burns Supper Database project: <https://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/supper-map/> (accessed 29 November 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Burns International Foundation website: <https://rbif.hu/history/> (accessed 29 November 2022).



In commemoration of the European Champion Club's Cup final between Real Madrid CF and Eintracht Frankfurt at Hampden Park on 18th May 1960, a match won 7-3 by Real Madrid for whom four goals were scored by legendary forward Ferenc Puskás (1927-2006), the greatest goalscorer of the 20th century.

This plaque was unveiled on 20 October 2015 in tribute to this world-famous Hungarian footballer by the Scottish Football Museum, the Puskás Institute, the Hungarian Embassy in London, the Hungarian Scottish Society, the Puskás International Football Foundation and the Robert Burns International Foundation.

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Indeed, the Robert Burns International Foundation are one of several partners involved in marking the importance of Puskás to European football, and its legacy in Scottish Football Museum in Hampden. But the plaque nonetheless marks one in an ever-growing number of markers in the cultural memory of Robert Burns. It is unique here because its main focus, on a great Hungarian footballer, essentially creates a space in which the role of Scotland's stake in the world of football has been given wider cultural implications. The legacy of Burns becoming entangled with Puskás through a charitable organisation only reveals the complicated and often unpredictable nature of cultural memory. What we choose to remember, and those we choose to represent us, can lead us to intriguing connections.



Left: Bob McDonald, Co-ordinator of the Trades House Robert Burns Festival; Right: Prof Gerard Carruthers, Francis Hutcheson Chair of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow. Picture taken by the author in September 2022, on a visit to see the plaque with Councillor Lesley McDonald; former footballer and volunteer for Football Memories Robert Harvey; and Richard McBrearty, curator at the Scottish Football Museum.