

## Burns Night – 24 January 2015

Chieftain, ladies and gentlemen, good evening. It is lovely to see so many familiar faces. I look forward to catching up with all our friends here tonight, and not treading on too many of your toes when it comes to the dancing.

I detect a few changes since last year. In my experience the warm tropical climate creates problems of shrinkage of the kilt - my own kilt has certainly suffered some shrinkage - and I see that many other gentlemen seem to have the same problem. But the upside of the Fijian climate is that the humidity is very good for the complexion - and I can see that all you ladies are looking even more beautiful this year.

Yasmin and I are delighted to share this evening with you again. As ever, Nadi hosts one of the first Burns Suppers in the world, because of our proximity to the International Date Line.

And just a wee preambular apology. Those of you who were present in Suva in July will recognise some of my themes this evening. But I have changed things around, and selected some different examples of Burns' work.

Robert Burns is unique among poets. There is no other literary figure in whose name, and on whose birthday each year, tens of thousands of people across the world sit down and enjoy a ceremonial meal. The cult of Burns is remarkable. But I maintain that the essential thing about Rabbie Burns is that he was a great poet. When he died in 1796, in debt, aged 37, worn out by hard work and illness, well loved but almost unknown outside Scotland, he was already a great poet. But like many great artists, his work only gained wider fame after his death.

If Burns Suppers ceased to exist it would make no difference to his stature as a writer. And the truest way to appreciate and honour a poet is to read his work. I want to give you a few excerpts which I hope will inspire you to read more.

Just a mention of the historical context. Scotland's national poet was born the same year as William Pitt, and the German writer Schiller. He was a near contemporary of Robespierre and Mozart, of Nelson and William Blake. He was born only 52 years after the Union between Scotland and England, 13 years after the defeat of the Jacobite cause at the battle of Culloden.

And my apologies to the non-Scots present about the language. The passage of time and the stifling of the Scots language by modern English have put some obstacles in the way of reading Burns. The "lyart haffets" of the cottar in the Cottar's Saturday Night are not immediately obvious as "grey side whiskers". The "hawkie" beyond the "hallan" do not instantly register as a whitefaced cow beyond a partition wall separating house from byre. But in most of his poems the context of the poem has already made the meaning sufficiently clear, particularly if you read it aloud. So please, put your trust in the poet and you will be greatly rewarded.

Burns' poems are full of memorable thoughts and images. Among his lyrics are phrases and verses now so universally known that their source is oft-forgotten. Here are three such phrases that he penned.

"The best laid plans o' mice, and men  
Gang aft agley"

"O wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as others see us"

"Nae man can tether time or tide".

Burns was incredibly versatile. He is a superb love poet, and for him "Love and Poesy" always went together. He began to write love poems as a boy of 15, and he never stopped falling in love and writing about it.

From My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose.

"As fair art thou, my bonie lass,  
So deep in luv am I,  
And I will luv thee still, my dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry."

Or from Ae Fond Kiss.

"I'll never blame my partial fancy:  
Naething could resist my Nancy!  
But to see her was to love her  
Love but her, and love for ever.  
Had we never loved sae kindly,  
Had we never loved sae blindly,  
Never met - or never parted -  
We had ne'er been broken-hearted."

But Burns was a master of many forms of verse. Picking up a Scottish tradition, he developed the verse epistle, a poem in letter form to a friend, often another poet.

In Epigram Addressed to an Artist

"Dear \_\_\_\_\_, I'll gie ye some advice,  
You'll tak it no uncivil:  
You shouldna paint at angels, man,  
But try to paint the Devil.

To paint an angel's kittle wark,  
Wi Nick there's little danger:  
You'll easy draw a lang-kent face,  
But no sae weel a stranger."

As a child Burns had been well taught, and he was an avid reader all his life in several languages, but poverty prevented a college education. And he often played up to the "heaven-taught ploughman-poet" label that was put on him - while at the same time resenting it. And resentment at hypocrisy sharpened his gift for satire.

In Address to the Unco Guid:

"O ye, wha are sae guid yoursel,  
Sae pious and sae holy,  
Ye've nought to do but mark and tell  
Your neighbour's fauts and folly."

After his love songs, Burns is perhaps most famous for his nature poetry. As a farmer himself, he did not idolize the countryside, and he often began with description, and then brought the subject round to his own state, of

happiness or gloom, as in these lines:

"The wanton coot the water skims,  
Among the reeds the ducklings cry,  
The stately swan majestic swims,  
And everything is blest but I."

For Scotland he had a burning fervour, after reading all he could of Scots history. As a boy Wallace, a hero of the 14C war of independence, had been one of his heroes. His poem Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn became an anthem of Scotland.

"Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,  
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,  
Welcome to your gory bed,  
Or to Victorie!  
Now's the day, and now's the hour:  
See the front of battle lour,  
See approach proud Edward's power -  
Chains and slaverie!"

With his patriotism went a quixotic sympathy for the Jacobite cause, which was finally defeated in 1746, only 13 years before Burns was born. He shared a common hostility to Hanoverian monarchy and its corrupt administration of Scotland:

"The injured Stuart line is gone,  
A race outlandish fills their throne,  
An idiot race, to honour lost: know them best despise them most."

He scratched those lines on a window of an inn in Stirling, looking up to the ruined castle which had cradled the Stewart kings.

But it is unlikely that Burns would have approved of a Stewart restoration for very long. In politics he was a radical. He supported the American War of Independence, and he wrote, in his Ode for General Washington's Birthday:

"But come, ye sons of Liberty,  
Columbia's offspring, brave as free,  
In danger's hour still flaming in the van,  
Ye know, and dare maintain, the Royalty of Man!"

Like his slightly younger English contemporaries, Wordsworth and Coleridge, he heard with joy in 1789 of the French Revolution. But by 1795, when war with Revolutionary France was imminent, he was writing a more pro-establishment line, with poems like "Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?"

His sympathy for the exploited comes out in many works like The Slave's Lament. But his deep and genuine feeling for the Brotherhood of Man is best expressed in A Man's a Man for A' That.

"The rank is but the guinea's stamp,  
The Man's the Gowd for a' that."

And later in that work he anticipates something of the sentiment of 19th Century Socialism:

"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 for a' that  
For a' that and a' that  
It's comin' yet for a' that  
That man to man the world o'er  
shall brithers be for a' that."

In what were to be his last years, Burns spent much of his time gathering all he could find of the remaining folk songs in the Scots language. It was a labour of love for which he received no payment. But he did it because, for a long time, the Church in Scotland had been hostile to popular music and songs - and so Burns rescued and rewrote many. And such was his intimacy with the original versions that the effect was to give to Scotland one of the finest collections of folk songs in any European country.

One example, of many, is *For the Sake of Somebody*, which Burns changed from a rather coarse country song for a man, into a haunting love song for a girl:

"My heart is sair - I dare na tell,  
My heart is sair for Somebody,  
I would wake a winter's night,  
For the sake o' Somebody,  
O-hon for Somebody! for Somebody could range the world aroun'  
For the sake o' Somebody."

If Burns' later preoccupation with songs gives cause for any regret as we look back at his work, it may be that it deprived us of more poems like *Tam o' Shanter*. This splendid, galloping, eldritch midnight adventure was written in 1791, on a request for a witch tale. Beautifully paced, its mock heroic style gives full rein to comedy. The plot is about a man caught peeking at half-naked women in a churchyard, and then being chased for his life by the witches until his horse reached the safety of the keystone of a bridge. It draws on all of Burns' powers:

So, after a night in the pub with his friends, Tam sets off for home, but is waylaid by a strange sight in a churchyard...

"... Warlocks and witches in a dance:  
Nae cotillon, brent frae New France,  
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,  
Put life and mettle in their heels.  
A winnock-bunker in the east,  
There sat Auld Nick, in shape o' beast;  
A touzie tyke, black, grim and large,

To gie them music was his charge:  
He screwed the pipes and Gary them skirl,  
Till roof and rafters a' did dirl"

Tam gets a bit excited watching the dancing of one witch in particular, who is wearing a very short skirt - a cutty sark. So he yells out "Weel done, Cutty Sark". And he is then chased for his life... racing home on his mare, Maggie, wondering whether he will ever see his dear wife Kate again.

"Ah Tam! Ah Tam! Thou'll get thy fairin!  
In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin!  
In vain thy Kate awaits thy comin!  
Kate will soon be a woefu woman!  
Now, do thy utmost, Meg,  
And win the key-stane of the brig;  
There, at them thou tail may toss,  
A running stream they dare na cross!  
But ere the key- stand she could make,  
The fiend a tail she had to shake;  
For Nannie, far before the rest,  
Hard upon poor Maggie prest,  
And flew at Tam wi furious ettle:  
But little wist she Maggie's mettle!  
Ae Spring brought off her master hale,  
But left behind her Ian grey tail:  
The carlin claught her by the rump,  
And left poor Maggie scarce a stump.

Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read,  
Ilk man, and mother's son, take heed:  
Whenever to drink you are inclined,  
Or cutty sarks run in your mind,  
Think! ye may buy the joys o'er dear:  
Remember Tam O'Shanter's mare."

Well, I suspect that some of the gentlemen present may recall similar scenes at the end of a wild night out - when they were young and foolish?

Burns variety of themes and styles is outstanding. He is a poet for all moods and all seasons. His own humanity and his failings, and his sympathy for a wider humanity, shine through everything he wrote. He wrote fast, often under difficult circumstances, and the quality of his work is uneven. His poems in "Augustan English" often seem stilted and artificial beside his poems in Scots. And some of his poems are "occasional" in the sense that they were written in response to a particular event, and read less well under the critical eye of posterity. But these are small criticisms against the treasury of his complete work. If there are some farthings, 'placks and bodles' among the gold he has left us, we are still a little richer for each word from his pen.

I would ask you now to be upstanding, and to be sure you have some liquid in your glass, amber or any other

colour.

I give you the toast, to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.

Thank you.

**Roderick Drummond**  
**British High Commissioner**  
**Suva**  
**Fiji Islands**