

Robert Burns 1759-1796

George D. Stevens

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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THE FAREWELL

To the Brethren of St. James Lodge, Tarbolton

*Adieu! a heart-warm, fond adieu;
Dear Brothers of the Mystic Tie!
Ye favour'd, ye enlightened few,
Companions of my social joy!
Tho' I to foreign lands must hie,
Pursuing Fortune's slidd'ry ba';
With melting heart and brimful eye,
I'll mind you still, tho' far awa.*

*Oft have I met your social band,
And spent the cheerful, festive night;
Oft, honour 'd with supreme command,
Presided o'er the Sons of Light;
And by that Hieroglyphic bright,
Which none but Craftsmen ever saw!
Strong Mem'ry on my heart shall write
Those happy scenes, when far awa.*

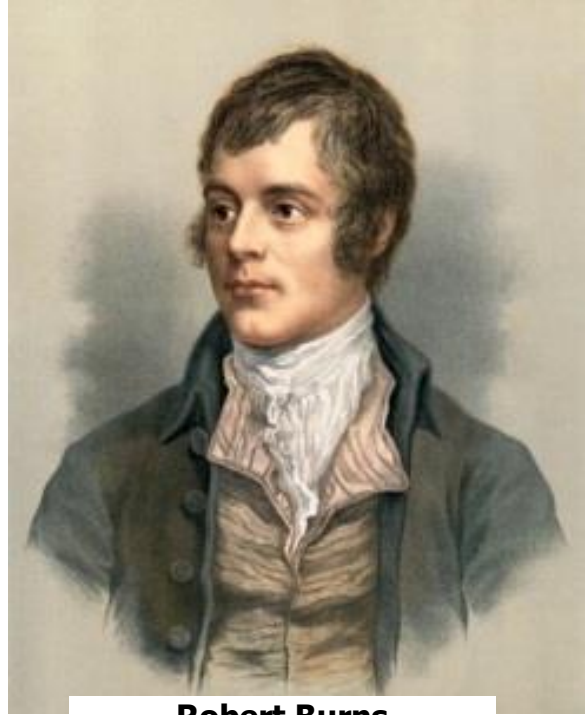
*May Freedom, Harmony, and Love,
Unite you in the Grand Design,
Beneath th' Omniscient Eye above--
The glorious Architect Divine--
That you may keep th' Unerring Line,
Still rising by the Plummet's Law,
Till Order bright completely shine,
Shall be my pray'r, when far awa.*

*And You farewell! whose merits claim
Justly that Highest Badge to wear;
Heav'n bless your honour'd, noble Name,
To Masonry and Scotia dear!
A last request permit me here,
When yearly ye assemble a',
One round, I ask it with a tear,
To him, the Bard that's far awa.*

Robert Burns

Robert Burns - George D. Stevens

Robert Burns was a great Scotsman, and despite his humble origin, brought fame to his country and his fraternity through the written and spoken word. Born in a two-room cottage built by his father, a tenant farmer, on January 25, 1759, he was the eldest of the seven children of William Burns and his wife Agnes. While the family was poor, it enjoyed a good life, one in which the father, who has been characterized as an "upright, devout man, somewhat dour, but intellectual," exercised a constructively great influence over his sons.



Robert Burns

Robin Carr, in the August 1985 issue of *The Philaethes*, states that while Burns' mother could neither read nor write, his father could do both. Furthermore, despite his low social position, it seems that he was obsessed with the desire to give his boys the best education he could afford. And it is remarkable, given the circumstances in which he found himself --he was a tenant farmer -- that he was able to do as much as he did.

Thus, while formal instruction was limited, when judged by modern standards, Burns' father did send the boys to school, when he could afford to, and he was instrumental in establishing a small school in the neighborhood for his children and for those of a neighbor. Most importantly, however, he created an atmosphere of learning in the home, where emphasis was placed on reading good literature and on the committal of poems to memory.

Following a scant two years of study with John Murdock, a teacher hired by his father, Burns studied geometry, and for awhile, at the age of 15, he lived with a maternal uncle in Toballocknell, where it was hoped that he would take up surveying. This was not to

be, however, for Burns was not a strong and robust lad and he found the demands of the surveying trade not to his liking.

Burns returned to his family, which by this time had moved to Tarbolton. There he enriched his mind, while working on the farm, by reading the English classics, the first six books of Euclid, the Bible, and the literature of the Presbyterian Church. At some point in time he also studied Latin, wherein he found a foundation for his future work in creative writing. One thing became certain early on: Burns was very unenthusiastic about farming.

Thus, at the age of 22, Burns left home to take up residence with relatives, who were to teach him the art of flax dressing. His fortunes took a turn for the worse, however, when the shop in which he was employed burned down during a festive New Year's Eve celebration. Now out of work he turned to writing, and for diversion he formed a debating society with a group of friends. This was fashionable at the time among those who sought to enrich their minds.

About this time Burns became acutely aware of Freemasonry and petitioned for the degrees in St. David's Lodge No. 174 in Tarbolton, where he was initiated on July 4, 1781. He was passed and 'raised in that lodge in October of the same year. Obviously the experience made a deep impression on him, for in the next few years he gave much of himself and of his work to the promotion of the Craft and its interest.

Burns found in Freemasonry the kind of men he wanted to associate with, men who had established themselves in life, men who were versed in the arts, men who appreciated the importance and the significance of wit and a well-turned phrase. Most importantly, however, he found friends in Freemasonry, Brothers who would share his concerns and burdens and give him the kind of support which was so essential to the great work to which he was called.

Robert Burns - George D. Stevens

Burns was a member of a great many lodges; wherever he went, it seems, he was honored with honorary memberships. Soon after he was raised he became a member of St. James Lodge No. 178, in which he became Deputy Master in 1784, an office he held for the next four years. Other lodge memberships of particular note include St. John's Lodge No. 22, in Kilmarnock, which was the first lodge to designate him as their Poet and to confer honorary membership on him.

Just previous to this, according to Mackey, Burns had joined the St. John's Kilwinning Lodge in Kilmarnock, on which occasion the lodge was presided over by one of his friends, a fellow by the name of Gavin Hamilton. Soon thereafter, on February 1, 1787, Burns became a member of the Lodge of Canongate Kilwinning, No. 2, in Edinburgh, which possesses the most ancient lodge room in the world, and this lodge is said to have invested Burns with the title of Poet Laureate. While the authenticity of this action is questioned by some authorities, Burns attachment to the lodge is an established fact.

History informs us that Burns was made a Royal Arch Mason by brethren "at a general encampment." It is suggested by one brother, who was an acknowledged authority on the old workings of the Scottish Royal Arch Chapters, that Burns was probably made a Knight Templar as well, as under the old regime the two ceremonies were often given together.

It has been said many times that Bobby Burns was always in love, and infatuation occasionally led him into difficulty. Certainly his married life was a bit unusual, even given the morality of his day. He was wedded to Jean Armour, the daughter of a Master Mason, by whom he had three children, including a set of twins. But the marriage, which merely involved the signing of papers by the bride and groom, was forced, she being already with child, and as soon as the ceremony had been concluded, the bride's family induced her to return home -- without Burns. In anger he destroyed the document of agreement, believing that in this act he had also dissolved the marriage.

Robert Burns - George D. Stevens

Low in spirit and in the depths of despondency, Burns decided to leave the country, to go to Jamaica and to nurse his wounded ego. But before his preparations could be completed, he met another of the women in his life, Mary Campbell, who was also known as Highland Mary. He fell in love, elected to stay home, at least for awhile, and his relationship to her inspired some of his best poetry. Unfortunately, before they could finalize their preparations for a departure to Jamaica, on which they had agreed, she became terminally ill and died. He buried her by the River Afton.

Still intent on going to Jamaica, and in need of funds to get there, Burns published a book of his works which he entitled Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect. It was a smash hit, so successful, in fact, that it changed his mind about leaving the country, and instead set forth for Edinburgh to arrange for the publication of a second edition. While there he met Sir Walter Scott, who later compared Burns favorably with the most distinguished men of the time.

Having sold the second edition of his poems and being enriched in the amount of some \$2,500.00, he left Edinburgh and once again became entangled with Jean, the girl he had married. Since their wedding she had borne twins, one of which died. Their reunion resulted in another pregnancy, in consequence of which Burns again departed for Edinburgh. He then thought better of his actions, however, and soon returned, and in 1783 the couple were remarried in a legal ceremony.

On his trip to Edinburgh Burns met a James Johnson, who was interested in collecting traditional Scottish songs. In consequence of that meeting he traveled the countryside to collect some 200 such songs, for which he refused payment. Apparently his services were inspired by a personal sense of patriotism and by a love for this elemental form of genuine poetry. Later he was to do the same thing for George Thompson, a Masonic friend for whom he collected a hundred songs, again refusing payment for his services.

Robert Burns - George D. Stevens

Being legally married at last and with a growing family, Burns took a farm at Ellisland, near Dumfries, but the venture was unsuccessful, in part because of Burns' dislike of farming and in part because of his limited capacity for the work. Thus he sought an alternative, which he found through a friend, who obtained a position for him as an excise man and tax collector. This permitted him to lease his farm and move his family into Dumfries, where his income now permitted them to live comfortably and to enjoy some of life's luxuries.

These were happy years, but they were to be brought to an end by the death of Burns' daughter, which upset him so that he too became ill and took to bed for an extended period. He developed rheumatic fever, from which he never recovered, despite treatments at a fashionable health spa at a Brow. Returning home from treatments there on July 18, 1796, he died three days later.

It is reported that ten thousand people were in attendance at his funeral on July 25, at which time it is recorded that three volleys were shot over his grave. Coincidentally, during the funeral service, his wife gave birth to his son. She and the family were then supported by a generous public, which contributed 700 pounds to their support.

Two memorials were eventually erected in Burns' honor. One was at Ayr, where he was born, and the other in Dumfries. At the latter site a mausoleum was erected by public subscription, and his body was transferred there in 1815.

Many have said of Burns that because of a lack of money he had worked physically beyond his capacity all of his life. Some say that his wants led him to depend on spirits for help and release from his cares. But for whatever reasons and to whatever extent Burns was mortal, it did not prevent him from writing, from creating, and from making life more beautiful and worthwhile for his contemporaries and for all generations since then. In truth, he paid his dues.

Robert Burns - George D. Stevens

Robin Carr says, and I quote: "It is true that Burns had many faults, all men do, but it is also true that he spread the masonic ideals of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth throughout Scotland. Freemasonry was the stepping stone from the ploughman to the Gentry, a Gentry which Burns saw as cruel and uncaring. The Fraternity opened the minds of such men to Burns' ideas, thoughts and philosophy, a philosophy of life which is truly masonic in nature."

At the same time it must be appreciated that Burns enjoyed fellowship. In his own words, penned to a friend, he wrote that: "I have yet fixed on nothing with respect to the serious business of life. I am, as usual, a rhyming, Mason-making, rattling, aimless, idle fellow." But as Mackey says, in spite of this idleness, Burns was very prolific in verse and he gave of his genius liberally to the Masonic order. Since his death his work has lived on, a tribute to the worth of a man who spoke for his country and his people. In doing so he established his position among the literary greats of the world. On that score William Pitt spoke for many when he said that he could think of "none since Shakespeare that had so much the appearance of sweetly coming from nature."

I should like to conclude with a few words about the poetry of Burns, which he wrote basically within a short ten-year period. He wrote primarily in the Scottish dialect, and he is considered to have been an originator in this style. It is interesting to note that poems which he wrote in what is termed polite and proper English were not well received.

Critics wrote that he distilled from his country's ballads the purest and the finest of its poetry, which some have said "reads as if it were the folk music of a nation of geniuses." He was able with tenderness, with understanding, and with simplicity to depict the life that he knew. His satirical poems reflect the strength and directness of that life. But it was his lyricism that earned him fame. There is no corner of the English-speaking earth where the songs of this Scottish peasant have not become an integral part of life's culture.

Robert Burns - George D. Stevens

George Smith says that "criticism of Burns is only permitted to Scotsmen of pure blood." He also states that "if there are more elegant and subtle song writers, no one even approaches Burns in masculine strength or concentrated utterance of passion... he reflects every mood of the national character, its tenderness, its sensuous vigor, and its patriotic fervor."

Among Burns' most famous poems are "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "Tam O'Shanter", "Bannockburn," "To a Mouse," "To a Louse," "Holy Willie's Prayer," and "A Man's a Man for a' That." Also of great value are the many letter and epistles that he wrote to Clarinda and many of his friends. Over the years some eight volumes of his poems and letters have been collected and published.

In his poems entitled "The Cotter's Saturday Night" we are able to see Robert Burns clearly. The poem suggests the life that he knew, a life in which his father played a dominate role. It speaks of the poor peasant farmer, coming home from a hard day in the fields, to be greeted by a loving wife and family. It speaks of the role of the spiritual in that life, where by customs the father read from the Bible to the family. It speaks plainly of the values of a man who was deeply involved with the ills of society and the ailments of mankind. It also speaks of the reality of hard life, wherein the containment of injustice is the concern of all.

Let me close with some words of Burns which may well be his fairest epitaph. They are as follows:

*The poor inhabitant below
Was quick to learn,
and wise to know,
And keenly felt by the friendly glow,
And softer flame,
But thoughtless follies laid him low,
And stained his name.*

So Mote It Be.