

BURNS

THE ULSTER CONNECTION



*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne*



New bridge across the River Ayr, Ayr.

Few poets excite such devotion as Robert Burns, the national bard of Scotland. His appeal, however, goes far beyond his native land, with songs like *Auld Lang Syne*, *Ye Banks and Braes O' Bonnie Doon*, and *My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose* known throughout the world.

Burns was born into a poor farming family on 25th January 1759 in Alloway, near Ayr in south-west Scotland. Though he had to work hard in the fields as a boy, in his spare moments Robert pursued his love of reading.

In a bookshop he came upon some poems by the Scots poet Robert Fergusson. He had already written some verse himself but Fergusson's poems opened his eyes to

the way in which the Scots tongue could be used. Burns wrote in both English and Scots, but much of his best poetry is in the Scots Language, known also as Lallans.

After the death of his father in 1784, Robert's family moved to another farm at Mossgiel, near Mauchline. Here he had numerous affairs with several girls, and fell in love with Jean Armour. Jean's father, however, refused to allow the match.

By mid 1786 his amorous entanglements had made it almost impossible for him to continue in Mauchline, and he was about to leave Scotland for a job in Jamaica when his first book of poems was published. The slim volume of 34 poems was a great success and all the copies sold within a month.

Soon literary Scotland was eager to know the author. Burns went to Edinburgh and proved popular amongst the fashionable set, which enjoyed his company and conversation.

Two years later Burns married Jean Armour and bought a new farm. The farm was unsuccessful and, in spite of the popularity of his poetry, he made little money from it. He managed to get a small government job in Dumfries which provided a steady income. Yet all the time he continued to pour out poetry and song.

Early in 1796 his health began to fail and he died on the 21st July 1796 at the early age of 37, due not to alcoholism, as is sometimes thought, but to a rheumatic heart condition.

"What an antithetical mind! - tenderness, roughness - delicacy, coarseness - sentiment, sensuality - soaring and grovelling, dirt and deity - all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!"

Byron on Robert Burns, Journal,
13th December 1813

Now, over 200 years later, he is regarded by many as the greatest Scot of all. A year before he died Burns said to his wife, "Ay, Jean, they'll think more of me a hundred years after this." That prophecy was certainly fulfilled.

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The Ulster Tradition

Ulster is separated from Scotland by the narrow North Channel, which is at one point only 13 miles wide. Historically, this channel has been a link rather than a barrier, and from the earliest times it has witnessed a constant coming and going of peoples. Some people have viewed Ulster as an extension of Scotland. With equal logic, Scotland might be viewed as an extension of Ulster.

Travelling around Ireland in 1796-7, just after Burns's early death, the French Royalist émigré, de Latocnaye, concluded that "Belfast has almost entirely the look of a Scotch town, and the character of its inhabitants has considerable resemblance to that of the people of Glasgow."

Writing about Co. Antrim, de Latocnaye thought "the way of speaking, and even of dressing, is much more Scotch than Irish". Burns holds a central position in the Ulster-

Belfast City Hall, Belfast.



Scots literary tradition, and had a profound influence on the late 18th and early 19th century group of Ulster poets known as the "rhyming weavers".

When the first edition of Burns poems, known as the Kilmarnock edition, was published in July 1786, extracts were printed in the *Belfast News Letter* – the first paper in Ireland and probably the first in the British Isles to do so. Thereafter Burns's poetry appeared frequently in the pages of that newspaper. Indeed, it published many pieces by the 'Ayrshire Ploughman' before they appeared in any collected edition of his works.

Such was the impact of Burns in Ulster that the first edition of his poetry printed outside Scotland was in Belfast. The Edinburgh edition appeared in 1787, and James Magee of Bridge Street, Belfast, reprinted and republished it in the same year.



Queen's University, Belfast.

When Burns died in 1796 appreciative obituaries were printed in the *Belfast News Letter* and the *Northern Star*.

The influence of Burns on Ulster-Scots poets continued long after his death. For example David Herbison (1800-1880) was a great admirer of his work. See especially his volume *Midnight Musings*; or *Thoughts from the Loom*.

Such was the influence of Burns in Ulster that it is often said that there was a time when in many Ulster homes there were but two books, the Bible and Burns. Ulster people read his poetry and understood it. And so, even in well-thumbed old copies, the glossary at the back will generally be untouched since many of the Scots words

were common in Ulster and needed no explanation.

In 1859 the centenary of the poet's birth was widely celebrated in Ulster. An oil painting of Burns was commissioned in Belfast and presented to Eliza Burns, the daughter of Robert's eldest son, who married a Dr Everitt and came to live in Belfast's York Street.

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The first Belfast Burns Club was formed in 1872, and survives to this day as the Belfast Burns Association.

Andrew Gibson was a native of Ayrshire who settled in Belfast. He was a governor of the Linen Hall Library and one of the first presidents of the Belfast Scottish Association. A Burns enthusiast, he collected over 2,000 volumes of Burns and Burnsiana. This collection was purchased by public subscription in 1901 and placed in the Linen Hall Library. It is one of the largest and best collections in the world.

Around the same time a collection of books and portraits belonging to Mrs Everitt was entrusted to the Library by her daughter, Mrs Burns Thomas.

Linen Hall Library, Belfast.



Burns has a universal appeal. In Ulster he transcends the political and religious divides. As the Tyrone writer, Benedict Keily, explained:

“Burns became a popular folk author in Ulster, Catholic and Protestant, as he never was or could have been in any other part of Ireland. He still remained so in my boyhood; and I recall the local ragged rhymester saying to me with a seriousness at which it was not possible to laugh, that: “Burns was the best of us”.

Burns really does speak to all.

My Luve is like a Red Red Rose

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
O my Luve's like the melodie,
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

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

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare-thee-weel, my only Luve!
And fare-thee-weel, a while!
And I will come again, my Luve,
Tho' 'twere ten thousand mile!



Auld Lang Syne

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne!

For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne.
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

And surely ye'll be your pint stowp!
And surely I'll be mine!
And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

We twa hae run about the braes,
And pou'd the gowans fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary fit,
Sin' auld lang syne.

We twa hae paid'd in the burn,
Frae morning sun till dine;
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin' auld lang syne.

And there's a hand, my trusty fere!
And gie's a hand o' thine!
And we'll tak a right gude-willie waught,
For auld lang syne.



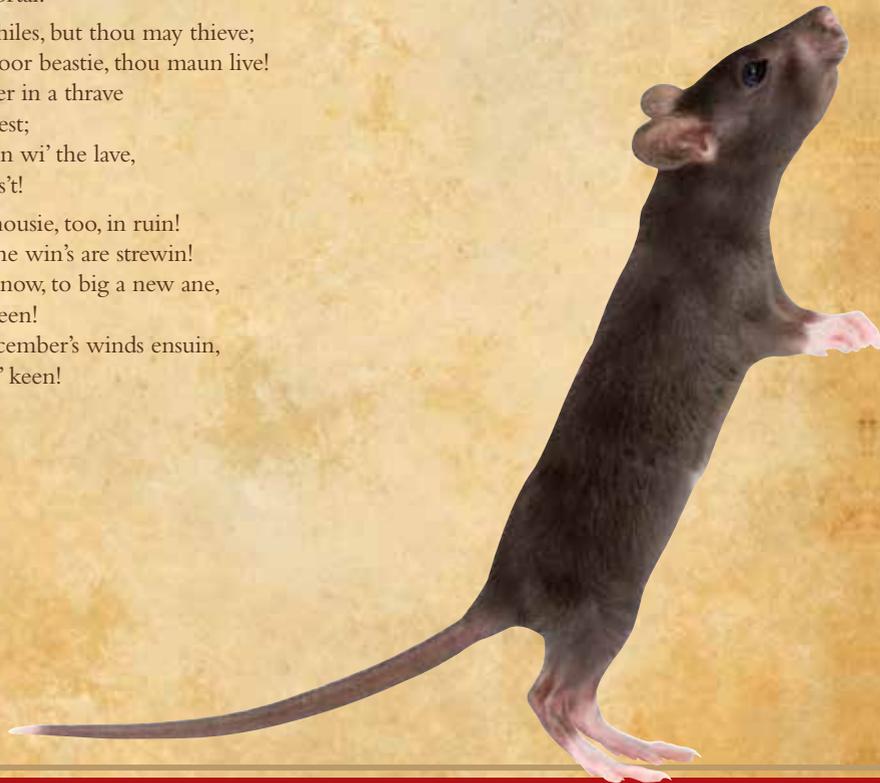
*To a Mouse, on turning her up
in her nest with the plough*

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi' bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
Wi' murd'ring pattle!

I'm truly sorry man's dominion,
Has broken nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whiles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request;
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss't!

Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
O' foggage green!
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
Baith snell an' keen!



*To a Mouse, on turning her up
in her nest with the plough*

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,
An' weary winter comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell-
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro' thy cell.

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee mony a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld!

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' 'men
Gang aft agley,
An'lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

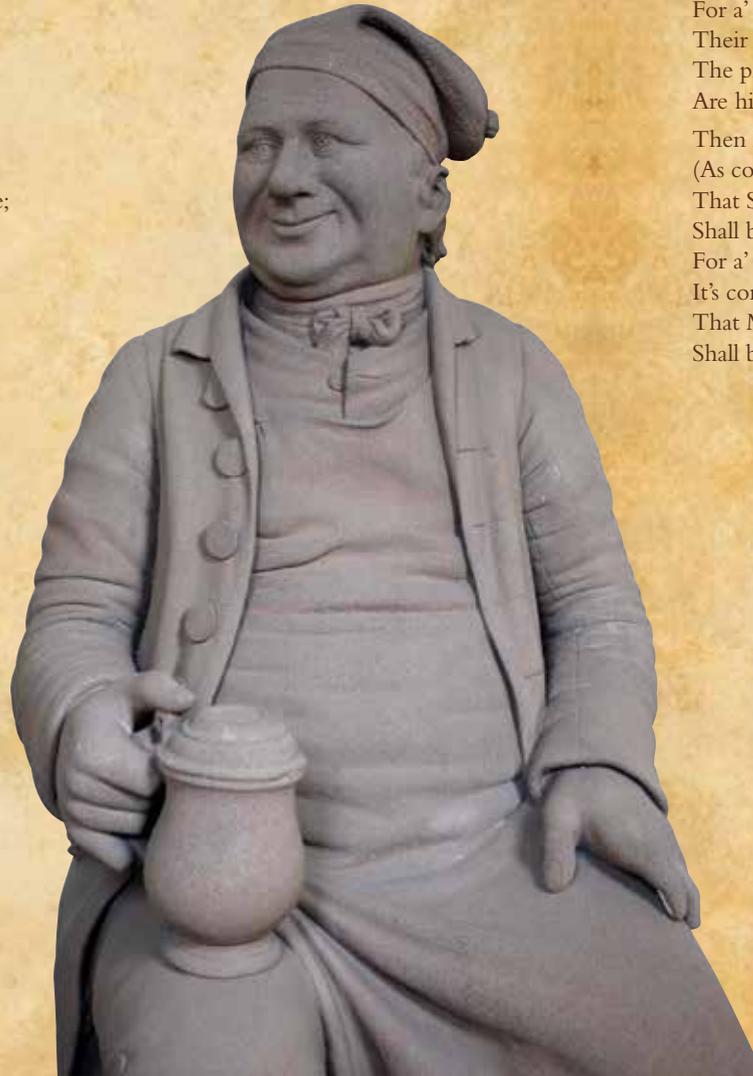
Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me
The present only toucheth thee:
But, Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

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A Man's A Man For A' That

Is there for honest Poverty
That hings his head, an' a' that;
The coward slave—we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Our toils obscure an' a' that,
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The Man's the gowd for a' that.
What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin grey, an' a' that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;
A Man's a Man for a' that:
For a' that, and a' that,
Their tinsel show, an' a' that;
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.
Ye see yon birkie, ca'd a lord,
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that;
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a coof for a' that:
For a' that, an' a' that,
His ribband, star, an' a' that:
The man o' independent mind
He looks an' laughs at a' that.



A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, an' a' that;
But an honest man's abon his might,
Gude faith, he maunna fa' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Their dignities an' a' that;
The pith o' sense, an' pride o' worth,
Are higher rank than a' that.
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, an' a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's coming yet for a' that,
That Man to Man, the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.



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Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn

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 o' battle lour;
See approach proud Edward's power-
Chains and Slaverie!

Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a Slave?
Let him turn and flee!

Wha, for Scotland's King and Law,
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
Free-man stand, or Free-man fa',
Let him on wi' me!

By Oppression's woes and pains!
By your Sons in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free!

Lay the proud Usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow!-
Let us Do or Die!



Statue of Robert Bruce at the Bannockburn Heritage Centre near Stirling.

Burns - did you know?

- Iconic singer and songwriter, Bob Dylan has said the one lyric which most influenced his career was *"My love is like a red, red rose"*
- The sixteenth US President, Abraham Lincoln was a fan of Burns work and could recite many of his poems by heart.
- In 1803 George Thompson, secretary of an organisation encouraging Scottish arts and culture, commissioned Ludwig van Beethoven to compose music to accompany some of Burns poetry
- In 1786, Burns was busy making plans to emigrate to Jamaica but changed his mind when his first publication, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, was an immediate success.
- American philosopher and author, Ralph Waldo Emerson once stated...
"The confession of Augsburg, the Declaration of Independence, the French Rights of Man and the Marseillaise are not more weighty documents in the history of freedom than the songs of Burns."

*"I mourned with thousands, but as one
More deeply grieved, for he was gone
Whose light I hailed when first it shone,
And showed my youth
How verse may build a princely throne
On humble truth."*

William Wordsworth,
(At the grave of Burns)





Ulster-Scots Community Network

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