



PAPER

Robert 'Rabbie' Burns

Summary: The life, loves and poems of Robert 'Rabbie' Burns; together with his Masonic history.



Brother Robert Burns (1759–1796), unknown artist
©Museum of Freemasonry

Robert Burns was born on Tuesday 25 January 1759, as Robert Burness, the eldest of the seven children of William Burness (1721–1784) a tenant farmer, and his wife Agnes. Robert's baptism entry¹ records his surname as 'Burns' rather than 'Burness' denoting the more common spelling in Ayrshire. He adopted this shortened form when he was 27 years old.

Robert 'Rabbie' Burns was, and is to this day, Scotland's favourite son. He is also known as 'the Ploughman Poet', 'the Bard of Ayrshire' and, in Scotland, simply as 'the Bard'. In all, he wrote 368 songs and 191 poems. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Scotland, and is celebrated worldwide. He is the best known of the poets who wrote in Scots, although much of his writing is also in English and a 'light' Scots dialect, accessible to an audience beyond Scotland. When he wrote in English, his political or civil commentary is often at its most blunt. In 2009, he was voted 'Greatest Scot' by the Scottish public in a poll by Scottish Television.

Childhood

Burns was born two miles south of Ayr, in Alloway, in a house built by his father (now the Burns Cottage Museum), where he lived until he was seven years old, when his Father sold the house and took the tenancy of the 70-acre Mount Oliphant farm, South-East of Alloway. Here Burns grew up in poverty and hardship, and the severe manual labour of the farm left its traces on him; in his stooped stance and weakened constitution. He had little regular schooling and got much of his education from his Father, who taught his children Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Geography and History and also wrote for them *A Manual of Religious Belief*.²

By the time he was 15, Burns was the principal labourer on his Father's farm. During the harvest of 1774, he was assisted by Nelly Kilpatrick, who inspired his first poem, *Handsome Nell*. The following year, he was sent to finish his education with a tutor at Kirkoswald, where he met Peggy Thomson, to whom he wrote two songs: *Now Westlin' Winds* and *I Dream'd I Lay*.

His earliest existing letters date from this time, when he began making romantic overtures to a Miss Alison Begbie. In spite of four songs written for her and a suggestion that he was willing to marry her, she rejected him. In 1777, Rabbie, now 18 years old, moved with his family to a 130-acre farm at Lochlea, near Tarbolton.

Masonic Initiation

Burns was Initiated as an Entered Apprentice at Saint David's Lodge in Tarbolton on 4 July 1781, when he was 22. He was Passed and Raised on 1 October 1781. When this Lodge became dormant, he joined the Kilwinning Saint James Lodge, No. 135, in Tarbolton. Although regularly meeting in Tarbolton, the 'Burns Lodge' also met in Mauchline. The Minutes for 1784 show that Burns was heavily involved in Lodge business, attending all nine meetings, Passing and Raising Brethren and generally helping to run the Lodge.

In 1785, he was appointed Deputy Master, and again attended all nine Lodge meetings, at one of which he Initiated and Passed his Brother Gilbert. Gilbert was eventually Raised on 1 March 1788.



Masonic Penny, Robert Burns's Lodge,
Tarbolton St James, No.135
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Life after his father's death

Burns continued to write poems and songs and began the first of two Commonplace Books when he was 24 in 1783, while his Father fought a legal dispute with his landlord. The case went to the Court of Session in Edinburgh, and a judgment was made in favour of Burness in January 1784, but he died two weeks later.

Rabbie and Gilbert, made an ineffectual struggle to keep the farm going, but after its failure they moved to a nearby farm at Mossgiel, where they engaged in an uphill struggle for survival over the next four years.

During the summer of 1784, Rabbie, now 25, got to know a group of girls known collectively as 'The Belles of Mauchline', one of whom was Jean Armour, the daughter of a stonemason. His many casual love affairs did not endear him to the elders of the local Kirk and he gained a reputation for dissoluteness amongst his neighbours. His first child, Elizabeth Paton Burns was born to his Mother's servant, Elizabeth Paton, while he was embarking on a relationship with Jean Armour who bore him twins in 1786. Although her Father initially opposed their marriage, they were eventually wed in 1788. Jean Armour bore him nine children in total, but only three survived infancy. Jean first became pregnant by Burns in March 1786. Burns signed a paper attesting his marriage to Jean, but her Father '*was in the greatest distress, and fainted away*'.³ To avoid local disgrace, her parents sent her to live with her Uncle in Paisley. Burns was in financial difficulties, and to make enough money to support a family he took up a friend's offer of work as a plantation book-keeper in Jamaica, at a salary of £30 per annum. This seems inconsistent with Burns' democratic views, as typified by his writing of *The Slave's Lament* six years later, but in 1786 there was little public awareness of the abolitionist movement which had only just started.

Around a year later, Burns, now 27, had fallen in love with Mary Campbell, whom he had seen in the church in Tarbolton. He dedicated the poems *My Highland Lassie O*, *Highland Mary* and *To Mary in Heaven* to her. The verse '*Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary, and leave auld Scotia's shore?*' suggests that they planned to emigrate to Jamaica together. Their relationship has been the subject of much conjecture. It is alleged that they exchanged Bibles and plighted their troth over the Water of Fail in a traditional form of marriage, but soon afterwards Mary Campbell left Ayrshire and returned to her parents in Campbeltown.

At about the same time, Burns embarked on a relationship with the separated Agnes 'Nancy' McLehose, with whom he exchanged passionate letters under pseudonyms (Burns called himself *Sylvander* and Nancy *Clarinda*). When it became clear that Nancy would not be easily seduced into a physical relationship, Burns moved on to Jenny Clow, Nancy's domestic servant, who bore him a son, Robert Burns Clow, in 1788. On his return to Ayrshire in February 1788, he resumed his relationship with Jean Armour and leased a farm at Ellisland near Dumfries in March and settled there in June. He also trained as a 'Gauger' (Customs and Excise Officer) as a back-up should farming prove unsuccessful. He was appointed a Gauger in 1789, and gave up the farm two years later.

Masonic Fame

At a meeting of Lodge St. Andrew in Edinburgh in 1787, the Grand Master of Scotland, Francis Carteris, proposed a toast to Burns, who had been appointed Poet Laureate of the Lodge. Further editions of the Kilmarnock Edition of Burns's poems were sponsored by the Edinburgh Freemasons, ensuring that his name spread around Scotland and subsequently to England and abroad. During a tour of the Scottish Lowlands, collecting material for 'The Scots Musical Museum', he visited many Lodges throughout Ayrshire and became an Honorary Member of several of them. He was re-elected Deputy Master of the Kilwinning Saint James Lodge in 1788, and presided at a meeting where several well-known Freemasons were given Honorary Membership. During his Highland tour, he visited many other Lodges. Between 1784 and 1788, the Kilwinning Saint James Lodge met 70 times. Burns was present at 33 of these meetings and occupied the Master's Chair at 25 of them. He was exalted a Companion of the Royal Arch in May 1787 at the St. Ebbe's Chapter in Eyemouth. As a token of their esteem, the Companions unanimously agreed to waive the usual admission fee for Burns.



Masonic Apron Presented to Robert Burns by Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe
Courtesy of Dumfries & Galloway Museums ([CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/))

Burns joined the Saint Andrew's Lodge, No. 179^a in Dumfries on 27 December 1788. It was the weakest of the six Lodges in Dumfries at the time. Its surviving records are scant, and we hear no more of Burns until 30 November 1792, when he was elected Senior Warden. From this date until Burns's final Lodge Meeting

on 14 April 1796, it appears that the Lodge met only five times. As his health began to fail, Burns began to fall into fits of depression, and he died on the morning of 21 July 1796 in Dumfries, aged 37. His funeral took place on Monday 25 July 1796, the day that his son Maxwell was born. He was at first buried in the far corner of St. Michael's churchyard in Dumfries, but, in September 1815, his remains were moved to the Burns Mausoleum in the same churchyard. Jean Armour was laid to rest with him in 1834.

Burns Night

After Saint Andrew's day on 30 November, Burns Night, celebrated on 25 January, has become the second Scottish National Day. It is celebrated with Burns suppers around the world. The first Burns Night supper was held in 1802 at The Mother Club in Greenock, on what was then thought to be Burns's birthday, 29 January. However, a check of the Ayr Parish records in 1803 revealed that the correct date was 25 January, and this has been the date of Burns Night ever since.

The celebrations start with a general welcome and announcements, followed by the *Selkirk Grace*. Then the haggis is piped into the room and around the table, before the reading of the famous Address to a Haggis after which it is cut open and served, with neeps and tatties (turnip/swede and potatoes). During the meal, Burns' *Immortal Memory* and other poems are read, toasts are proposed and drunk and the evening concludes with the singing of *Auld Lang Syne*.

References

1. <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/article/news-celebrating-birth-robert-burns>
2. Rogers, Rev. Charles, (1877), *Genealogical Memoirs of the Family of Robert Burns and of the Scottish House of Burnes*, p. 39, Royal Historical Society, London. <https://deriv.nls.uk/dcn23/9508/95086009.23.pdf>
3. Currie, Dr., (1826), *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns, The Ayrshire Bard*, Jones and Company, London.
4. Robert Burns first became a Mason when he lived in Ayrshire. On 27th December 1788, soon after he moved to Ellisland, he joined St Andrews Lodge 179, Dumfries. The apron (illustrated in main text) was presented to Burns on 12th December 1791. The inscription reads, 'Charles Sharpe of Hotham to Rabbie Burns. Dumfries, Dec 12 1791'. Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe (1750 - 1813) of Hoddam was a good friend of Burns, being a violinist and composer of music and verse. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dumfriesmuseum/7536053718>
5. Harper, Paul, *Famous Freemasons - A Prologue*, <https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084>

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- Read at home for private study
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 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

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Acknowledgement:

UGLE gratefully acknowledges Ray Hollins as the compiler and editor of this document, which is an extract from his series of ten volumes, collectively titled 'A Daily Advancement in Masonic Knowledge' and for his permission to publish it in this form.

He wishes to acknowledge the assistance of RW Bro Richard Fletcher, Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Vermont in The United States of America, and the Masonic Service Association of North America (MSANA) who gave their permission for the use of a wealth of interesting and informative material within their publications known as 'Short Talk Bulletins' and MSANA references are made at the end of each Short Talk in full copyright acknowledgement. Each 'Short Talk' has been carefully re-written by WBro Hollins PAGDC, to provide supplementary information from a wide variety of sources used for the benefit of Freemasonry in general.

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