



Paper

Robert Burns – Masonic Poet

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The career and poetry of Robert Burns.

Summary

An examination of the Masonic career and poems of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns.

Keywords

Scotland, Burns, Poems, Hymns, Music

Robert Burns – Masonic Poet



Aged 23, Robert Burns was Initiated on 4 July 1781 at Lodge St. David (No.174) in Tarbolton. His Initiation fee was 12 shillings and sixpence (the equivalent of 62½ pence!). The Lodge Minutes inform us that:

'Robert Burns of Lochly was passed and raised by Henry Cowan (Worshipful Master), assisted by James Humphrey (Senior Warden) and Alexander Smith (Junior Warden). The Lodge Secretary was Robert Woodrow, and the Treasurer was James Manson. John Tannock Taylor and other brethren were recorded as being present'.

Lodge St. David had been set up in 1773 by a group that had split from St James's Lodge (No.178), but the two had Lodges recombined in 1781, just before Burns' Initiation. However, they split again in 1782 and Burns decided to remain with St. James's Lodge, where he was elected Deputy Master on 27 July 1784. Burns was deputy to the Worshipful Master, Sir John Witfoord, whose attendance at Lodge meetings was infrequent, so Burns often had to occupy the Master's Chair in his stead.

1786 began badly for Burns. Unable to marry Jean Armour (who was the daughter of a Master Mason), he became involved with Mary Campbell, who is reputed to have had his child, but both subsequently died of typhus. Faced with the prospect of having to support a wife and child, he thought about emigrating to Jamaica, and it is thought that he wrote the following poem at this time:

The Farewell To the Brethren of St. James' Lodge, Tarbolton

Adieu! a heart-warm fond adieu;
Dear brothers of the mystic tie!
Ye favoured, enlighten'd 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'.

The publication of the Kilmarnock edition of Burns's poems in July 1786, and the support offered to him by the Kilwinning St. John's Lodge, Kilmarnock (whose Brethren all purchased subscription copies), brought some much-needed income and changed his mind, and in October he was made an honorary member of that Lodge. In thanks, he wrote the following poem, dedicated to the Lodge and its Worshipful Master, Major William Parker:

Masonic Song: Ye Sons of old Killie

Ye sons of old Killie, assembled by Willie,
To follow the noble vocation;
Your thrifty old mother has scarce such another
To sit in that honoured station.
I've little to say, but only to pray,
As praying's the ton of your fashion;
A prayer from thee Muse you well may excuse
'Tis seldom her favourite passion.

Ye powers who preside o'er the wind, and the tide,
Who marked each element's border;
Who formed this frame with beneficent aim,
Whose sovereign statute is order.
Within this dear mansion, may wayward Contention
Or withered Envy ne'er enter;
May secrecy round be the mystical bound,
And brotherly Love be the centre!

In 1787, the Grand Master of Scotland, Francis Chateris, and other Grand Lodge officers were present at a meeting of Lodge St. Andrew in Edinburgh when Burns was toasted with the words '*Caledonia and Caledonia's bard, Brother Robert Burns*'. In the same year, Burns was made an honorary member and Poet Laureate of the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge No. 2 in Edinburgh, and the first Edinburgh Edition of his poems was published. Many of his Lodge Brethren, as well as numerous other Brethren, purchased subscription copies.

Burns was exalted into the Holy Royal Arch in May 1787 at St. Ebbe's Lodge, Eyemouth. Such was his fame that the Companions waived the usual fee.

In 1788, Burns moved to Dumfries, and joined Lodge St. Andrew there. Four years later, he was elected Senior Warden, but this was the last Masonic office he held before his death in 1796.

Many of Burns's poems promote Masonic philosophy and ideals, for example, this one, which praises the Masonic valuing of good character over worldly titles and riches:

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.

In other Burns poems, the Masonic references are more overt:

The Mason's Apron

There's mony a badge that's unco braw,
Wi' ribbon, lace and tape on;
Let Kings and Princes wear them a',
Gie me the Master's apron!
The honest Craftsman's apron,
The jolly mason's apron,
Bide he at hame, or roam afar
Before his touch fa's bolt an' bar
The gates of fortune fly ajar,

'Gin he wears the apron!
For w'alth and honor, pride an' power,
Are crumbling stanes to base on;
Fraternity sh'u'd rule the hour
And ilka worthy Mason!
Each Free Accepted Mason!
Each Ancient Crafted Mason,
Then, brithers, let a halesome sang
Arise your friendly ranks along!
Gude wives and bairnes blithely sing
Ti' the ancient badge wi' the apron string
That is worn by the Master Mason!

The joys of a Masonic Festive Board are celebrated in this poem:

The Big-Bellie Bottle

Then fill up a bumper and make it o'erflow,
And honours masonic prepare for to throw;
May ev'ry true Brother of the Compass and Square
Have a big-belly'd bottle when harass'd with care.

This poem sounds more like a solemn hymn for a Lodge meeting:

Presentation of the Pillars

Long may this Lodge in prosperity shine
And its members still vie with each other
In spreading the light of our order divine
And relieving the wants of a brother.

May envy and malice ne'er enter that door
That is aye closely tyed to the cowan
But peace, love and harmony aye be in store
More abundant the older you're growing.

May our Master who presides like the Masters of old
In wisdom excel and astonish
May he never be heard erring brothers to scold
But with brotherly love aye admonish.

May our Warden in the West, like the sun's setting rays
Illumine the golden horizon
May his strength never fail with the burden of days
But increase every moment that flies on.

And to our Warden in the South, like the beauty of day
May he gladden the worn, tired and weary
Inspire with his smiles as they rest by the way
The toilers, and make them feel cheery.

And to you whom our Master is honoured to rule and instruct
Be ye always sober and steady
Expert in the use of each working tool
And aye hae them handy and ready.

Thus will the Temple we seek to upraise
Be completed when all do their duty
And our voices unite in a chorus of praise
To Wisdom, to Strength and to Beauty.

Whereas this one, told from a young woman's point of view, is definitely not solemn!:

A (Bawdy) Masonic Song

It happened on a winter night,
And early in the season.
Somebody said my bonny lad
Was gone to be a Mason.
Fal de ral, etc.

I cryed and wailed, but nought availed,
He put a forward face on.
And did avow that he was now
A Free Accepted Mason.

Still doubting if the fact was true,
He gave me demonstration;
For out he drew before my view
The Jewels of a Mason.

The Jewels all, baith great and small,
I viewed with admiration;
When he set his swage and drew his gauge,
I wondered at my Mason.

So pleased was I to see him ply
The tools of his vocation,
I beg'd for once he would dispense
And make a Maid a Mason.

Then round and round in mystic ground
He took the middle station,
And with halting pace he reached the place
Where I was made a Mason.

His compass stride he laid it wide,
I thought I guessed the reason.
But his mallet shaft it put me daft;
I longed to be a Mason.

Good plummets strong he downward hung
A noble jolly brace on;
And off a slant his broacher sent
And drove it like a Mason.

Then more and more the light did pour
With bright Illumination,
But when the grip he did me slip
I gloried in my Mason.

But the tempered steel began to fail,
Too soft for the occasion.
It melted lean he drove so keen,
My gallant noble Mason.

What farther passed is here locked fast,
I'm under obligation.
But fill to him, up to the brim,
Can make a Maid a Mason.

Finally, Burns's most famous words are sung at many Lodges and at many gatherings, extolling the joys of freindship and old time's sake. Here they are in full, including the less-well known verses:

Auld Lang Syne

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

Chorus:

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.

Chorus.

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.

Chorus.

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.

Chorus.

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.

Chorus.

##END##

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - 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*).

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

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

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