

To the Immortal Memory

It's hard to improve upon a good party with rich food, ample spirits, and gracious company. But the traditional Burns Supper improves on all these things in one important way: it adds homework. I will confess that I blithely handed assignments to Conrad and Vickie for the toasts that will come later without experiencing the slightest stirring of conscience. But I want you to know that I did not leave myself unyoked.

Boldly taking upon myself the traditional toast to the immortal memory of Scotland's bard, Robert Burns, I found, while researching online, a YouTube video of a *very* serious Scotsman who declared that, "You should read *at least* two biographies of Robert Burns, so that you get different perspectives on his life. More would be better."

I am not given, either by temperament or conviction, to focus much on the artists behind the art that I enjoy. I prefer poetry to poets, as a general matter. But with the aid of a wee dram to bolster my courage and the Kindle-edition biography of Robert Burns I hurriedly read this weekend, I would like to give you a small introduction to the man to whom we drink tonight.

Robert Burns was born nigh on 264 years ago, in 1759. He was the eldest son of a poor-but-educated gardener and a working woman. His father had given up a secure post gardening for the gentry to take on the risk of being a tenant farmer, where he hoped that through back-breaking work, some good fortune, and the providence of God he could earn a sufficient foundation upon which to build a family.

The tenant farmer's basic template was this: a third of the profit went to the rent, a third of the profit to cover the costs of running the farm, and a third of the profit for the family's needs. The rent must needs be paid no matter the harvest, and so if anything went wrong, the family would simply have to do with less. And Burns's family did do with less—and less, and less. The farm was mostly a money pit, and created debts while extracting back-breaking work from every member of his family.

But Robert's father valued education, and he got together with several neighbors to contract a young, educated member of the parish named John Murdoch to run an "adventure school" for some of the children. Here, Robert showed early aptitude in many subjects and became notable for his obvious intelligence. Murdoch often visited the Burns family, and his regular visits coupled with discussions of the world abroad and readings of poetry and Shakespeare around a candle or two in their small, two-room farmhouse were one of the great consolations for the otherwise grindingly hard life they led.

When Robert was a teenager, his father contrived a way for him to be trained as a surveyor. Robert learned well, though he wasn't drawn to the required geometry. His truer nature was

shown when he was called out by his sometimes sarcastic teacher for trying to found a debating society. “So, you think you are great debaters and can put the world right and improve our minds here in Kirkos’le, eh?”

Robert replied that they only wished to improve their own minds by formal discussion of interesting topics, such as “whether is a great general or a respectable merchant the more valuable member of society?”

“Indeed! And am I to understand that there’s more than one reply to sic a silly-like question?”

“If you like, sir,” Robert said, “to take your choice of either side, I will debate on the other and the class can judge of the relative value of our arguments.”

The teacher was forced to take the challenge, but after a few interchanges defending the supposedly obvious side of the general, he called off the debate with the excuse that they had wasted enough time.

Burns later created a club with his brother and some other friends called the Tarbolton Bachelors, that met for discussion and ale. Among the topics they discussed were, “Is a good education an aid to happiness in a labouring man? Is a savage or a civilized peasant the happier?”

These were vital questions for Robert. He was stuck by class and circumstance as a farmer, and by ill luck on land that only seemed to lose money. But he took deep pleasure in songs and in poetry, and found that he could delight himself with composing his own rhymes, which early on were never set to paper but composed and stored in his own head as he worked.

Things got bad and worse with money as his father died young and left him and his brother to run the farm, but he was able to finally put together some of the poems he had written over the years and publish a book. It was a huge success, and he pursued publishing a second edition with a trip to Scotland’s great city of Edinburgh, where he enjoyed a period of intense celebrity. He wrote “Address to a Haggis” during this time. But it was a mixed experience: he was both lauded by the upper classes of Edinburgh and also patronized. He was a “ploughman poet,” fit to be delighted in as much for the incongruity of his manners and dress as the quality of his poems.

One of the main things he hoped to get out of his time in Edinburgh was assistance in getting a position that would let him escape from farming, but the only help that materialized was an offer to get set up in a new farm. When he eventually took this offer—an enterprise that took three years to fail—his new neighbors mocked him for the fancy furniture and the extravagant collection of books he had crammed into the small farmhouse he’d built for himself and his new family.

Burns was eventually able to obtain training and a post as a gauger, or exciseman, who worked to enforce and collect taxes, especially on things like alcohol. This vocational move was jarring to many others' expectations of him, but offered a refuge from poverty when his farm failed. Burns stayed at this post and mostly did well until his too-early death due to a rheumatic heart condition.

At the inevitable risk of being reductionistic, Robert Burns's celebrity rested on three things: his poetry, his music, and his tremendous personal reputation.

Much of Burns's poetry was emphatically rustic: he wrote in traditional Scots dialect, and many of his greatest poems were about the commonplace things of rural life, like "To a Mouse" where a plowman who has unintentionally hit the nest of some field mice speaks with sympathy to the animal:

<i>Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,</i>	<i>I'm truly sorry Man's dominion</i>
<i>O, what a panic's in thy breastie!</i>	<i>Has broken Nature's social union,</i>
<i>Thou need na start awa sae hasty,</i>	<i>An' justifies that ill opinion,</i>
<i>Wi' bickerin brattle!</i>	<i>Which makes thee startle,</i>
<i>I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee</i>	<i>At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,</i>
<i>Wi' murd'ring pattle!</i>	<i>An' fellow-mortal!</i>

Burns's love of music began with his mother, who had a beautiful voice and an ample knowledge of traditional songs. Burns, on the other hand, could not carry a tune, a fact that distressed him sorely. He had an excellent sense of rhythm and took well to dancing, but his attempts to learn to play the fiddle also failed. But he became a great collector of traditional Scots songs, and would use his own idiosyncratic notation to take down songs from people he met on his travels. He supplied lyrics where there were only tunes or where words had been lost. He worked as an editor and collaborator with James Johnson on several volumes of *The Scots Musical Museum*, the majority of which he did with neither credit nor compensation.

Burns's personal reputation, however, may loom the largest of the causes of his fame. Maria Riddel, a close friend of Burns in the latter years of his life, "to her dying day... could never be got to admit that Robert Burns's poetry was so enthralling as his talk." Sir Walter Scott, who met Burns during his time in Edinburgh, wrote, "There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments; the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical temperament. It was large and of a dark cast, and glowed (I say literally glowed) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men in my time."

Burns was a famous partier, who celebrated the pleasures of drink and good company in his work, as in this bit from *Tam o' Shanter*, which describes him lingering late in a tavern:

*As bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure,
The minutes wing'd their way wi' pleasure;*

*Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious,
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!*

It's interesting to note, however, that Burns found prodigious drinking to be taxing, and was often teased for leaving the table with the women to go have tea while the men continued drinking. He once complained that while other people lost only one day in drinking heavily, he lost three: "the first in sinning, the second in suffering, and the third in repenting."

Enough, for the moment, of Burns the man.

When Rebekah, Axe, and I celebrated our first Burns Supper in 2021, I knew almost nothing about Robert Burns. We had ordered a take-out holiday meal from the Queen Vic, the British Gastropub down on H Street, that had become one of our most vital connections to the outside world. We had been in a state of relative lockdown for almost a year—a long, lonely year where Rebekah confronted unprecedented challenges and stresses as an "essential worker" at Trader Joe's, part of a small army of people keeping the necessities of life available even as we tried to shut down as much as possible all the other parts of living together.

I remember the first time we had a virtual cocktail hour with Conrad and Luba that year, positioning the iPad in the bar as we made drinks in our respective houses and then made clinking gestures toward our cameras. I remember eating outside in the cold with our friends as we hosted them the only safe way we could: in the open, often freezing air, huddled around a propane fire.

We celebrated that first Burns Supper with Wikipedia open, reading for the first time as we ate about the traditions of the haggis, the various toasts, and the singing of Auld Lang Syne. Axe had just learned to play Auld Lang Syne on the piano, and he played it as we sang:

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

At that moment, the world we had known felt very much in danger of being forgot. And into that moment came Robert Burns, a man whose words could pair the shadow of sadness and the tender joy of being with those we love that deeply matched the world of that January.

Tonight I am more grateful than I can say to be here with all of you. Robert Burns, among all his many legacies, is the great patron saint of the pleasures of good company. In that wise, I now invite you to raise a glass with me to the immortal memory of Robert Burns.