

Opening Robert Burns Address
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When people link Burns and romance together it is usually not his politics that comes to mind. We think of his loving poems about women, and his defiant marriage to his life-long love, Jean Armour whom he described as his “delicious armful” But there is another side to this young man of intense and deep feelings, and this evening I propose to tell you of that other side to Burns’ romanticism, his career as a political romantic.

Burns approached the politics of his day with the same passion we read in his love poems. His political ideas were sometimes not realistic. They can be summed up, by two ‘R’ words.

One, you will not be surprised to hear, is Romantic. In politics Burns was a Romantic, and that is the word that springs to the mind of anyone who has looked closely at his political attitudes. The other R word however is “Radical”, and as Hamlet said, “there’s the rub”.

When applied to politics, the word Romantic can be misleading. It has nothing to do with philandering, and a great deal to do with idealism. Lost causes are commonplace among political romantics, but the same idealism can also lead to great outcomes.

Burns lived at a time when the modern age was being born. Paul Johnson the historian referred to the events of those years as ‘the birth of the modern’. Today we call that period the Enlightenment. It was a time when the cruel enforcement of religious dogma was challenged, when science replaced magic, the benefits to society of personal freedom came to be recognized, when a new objective for government was being advocated: that government should change from securing the interests of the powerful to achieving the public interest, when the idea of the equal human dignity of all people replaced the idea of justifiable slavery and class and racial privilege, and the campaign for equal laws gained radical force. The liberal democracy we enjoy, or claim to have, today is the main political legacy of the Enlightenment period.

Robert Burns was a key figure in promoting the most popular ideals coming from the Enlightenment of the 18th century: democracy and the equal rights of men and women. Robert Burns not only cared deeply about the politics of his day but through

his poetry had an influence not only in his own land, but as far afield as our own country. In fact Robert Burns is one of the great inspirations of the democracy we so easily take for granted today, and to fully realize his best ideals is still a mighty challenge for our political leaders.

First a little biography. Burns was born on January 25, 1759 in South Ayrshire, son of a tenant farmer. As a boy he worked the plough, a fact that was remembered throughout his life and help to foster the glamorous reputation he acquired. His dog Luath, honoured in this famous statue, is running beside him.

The Presbyterian church insisted that every child attend school, and despite the family's poverty, and with the encouragement of his self-taught father, he became not only literate but learned. His father, William Burnes, whom Robert later described as "a gentleman who derived his patent of nobility direct from Almighty God", ensured that the boy was well read.

Richard Hindle Fowler, a biographer of Burns, makes it clear that at an early age, on his father's urging, Robert had studied a number of the great writings that produced the Enlightenment including John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* and perhaps Locke's other writings on the social contract between government and citizens— great intellectual sources of the American revolution and of the move to modernity.

By the age of 13 Burns knew Latin and French and read widely. He wrote poetry as a teenager and became acquainted with Adam Smith's widely read works, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which argued the importance of what we would call 'empathy', influenced him, and later he read Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Smith became one of his heroes but, despite an attempt, never met.

Ideas of the Enlightenment arrived in Australia with the First Fleet in Port Jackson in 1788, focusing the mind of Royal Navy Captain Arthur Phillip, and particularly the later governor Lachlan Macquarie who came from the same part of Scotland as Burns. The historian M.H. Ellis (*Lachlan Macquarie*, p.64) tells us that one of the close friends of Lachlan Macquarie, one of the greatest of our early governors, was John Dunlop, a son of Frances Anne Wallace Dunlop – Robert Burns's intimate correspondent and patron over many years, to whom he confided many of his innermost thoughts. ChatGPT tells me that Macquarie was also a friend of one of Frances' older children, Lt. Gen. James Dunlop, and dined with him in London after returning from his stint in Australia, and that the first dinner in honour of Burns' birth date in Australia occurred on 25 January 1818, during Macquarie's time.

Even today those who admire Burns, especially but not only those of Scottish descent, still feel some of the thrill that Edinburgh society is described as feeling in 1786 when the ploughman poet burst upon the scene. Burns had researched, in true

Enlightenment fashion, the culture of his beloved Scotland and published a book called *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. [8] He assigned the rights and profits to his brother Gilbert, so they could be used to support the child of Jean Armour. [Slide 9]. Burns had gone through a written mutual declaration of marriage with her, a declaration legal and binding under Scots law, against the wishes of her father. (James).

James Buchan, the grandson of that famous Scot John Buchan, of thriller fame, described Edinburgh's reaction to the young Burns in his book *Capital of the Mind*. To quote Buchan, Edinburgh believed in genius. "Pure genius had the power to demolish or suspend social form, and Edinburgh instantly decided that Burns was just such pure genius" (p.324). With his dark flashing eyes, his height, his charm, his warmth and his poetry, he "wowed" them all. [Slide 11] Mrs. Frances Dunlop, a descendant of Scottish hero William Wallace's brother, asked for his poems. He was feted by the high and mighty of the great city.

The 27 year old Burns was proud that he was largely unaffected by this adulation. He wrote to a friend in December of that year "You may bear me witness, when my bubble of fame was at its highest, I stood, unintoxicated, with the inebriating cup in my hand" (Buchan, p.327).

Among Burns's great romantic ideals was Scotland itself - rebuilt and restored after the disaster of the Stuart uprising that, after a promising start, had ended in the bloodbath of the battle of Culloden in April 1746, followed by massacres in the Scottish towns and villages and harsh restrictions on Scottish culture (including banning the wearing of the kilt).

This brings me to the word "Radical". Born some 13 years after the battle of Culloden, in his romantic imagination Burns wanted big changes. Romantic he might be, yet he was a true child of the Enlightenment. He had no difficulty in picturing a better, more moral and more equal world based on sympathy or (as we might say now) empathy with others and regard for their good opinions.

He was dissatisfied with many aspects of his time, and he started with the regime in London. He disliked the union of the two kingdoms, England and Scotland, which had occurred on May 1, 1707. He was a sympathizer with those who wanted to reverse the result of Culloden – the Jacobites (those who had supported the exiled king James and his Grandson Charles Edward Stuart. ('Jacobus' is Latin for 'James')). This was one of those lost causes. Supporting the Jacobites was not wise, but that didn't stop him.

In 1787 Burns embarked on a tour of the Highlands by coach, and was impolitic enough to scratch on the window of the inn at Stirling a treasonous Jacobite-inspired

poem against the Hanoverian Georges (Fowler, p.15). With his usual passion he wrote: (Lines 7 to 11):

*The injured Stewart-line are gone,
A Race outlandish fill their throne;
An idiot race, to honour lost;
Who know them best despise them most.*

To write this on an inn window was the eighteenth-century equivalent of sending an email to the world. The email, as they say, is deadlier than the mail. Widely circulated emails can cause a lot of difficulties. Every traveller could read his message, and that could get him into trouble.

As our hero reflected on this fact he became more and more disturbed by it, and – still using the language of emails – he decided to recall it. A couple of months later he returned to the inn and smashed the window, but it was too late. Many travelers had noted the verses.

He was less cautious on another occasion when he attended an occasion when whisky was flowing freely, and a toast was proposed to the British Prime Minister William Pitt. Burns leapt to his feet and sought to amend the toast to “The health of a greater and better man, George Washington”,

When Burns was 17, Thomas Jefferson had penned the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence, declaring that all men were created equal, and endowed with certain inalienable rights, among which were life liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and further, that to secure these rights governments were instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

These were sentiments that Robert Burns felt, in the very fibre of his being, were true. His great hero was Tom Paine, the man whose book *Common Sense* was widely credited with having stirred essential popular support for the American revolution. Like Jefferson, the young poet was hopeful that the French Revolution of 1789 might have a happy outcome. This was the romantic and the radical in him combined.

In his letters to Frances Dunlop, Burns expressed pro-revolutionary views, telling her with satisfaction that groans and hisses had drowned out God Save the King in the Dumfries theatre, and more dangerously, failing to express sympathy for the French King and Queen at their execution. Apparently, for Frances Dunlop this was too much. She broke off relations with Robert but kept the confidences he had entrusted to her (Fowler, p.30).

These were tough political times, and the English were not about to take any nonsense from the Scots. Burns was appalled to discover in 1793 that he was being

investigated for his political views, which threatened his livelihood as an excise agent, and contained a much more serious threat. When Burns heard of the investigation, he quickly passed his copies of Paine's books, *Common Sense* and the *Rights of Man*, to his friend George Haugh for safe keeping. He wrote letters asserting his innocence. He got off with a warning and reprimand from the authorities. Others were not so fortunate.

That year, the barrister Thomas Muir, Vice-President of one of the Societies of Friends of the People was tried on sedition in Edinburgh and sentenced to 14 years transportation to New South Wales, along with four other so-called Scottish Martyrs.

It seems likely that as a consequence of the harsh sentences Burns wrote his great song "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled" (August 1793), the final words of which are:

Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow!—
Let us do or die!

Despite the trial of the Scottish Martyrs Burns continued to delight in the company of those with radical opinions. He inscribed a book on *The Constitution of England* he gave to the Dumfries Library in these words:

"Mr. Burns presents this book to the Library and begs they will take it as a creed of British Liberty – until they find a better".

This was another email. Reflecting on it overnight, he returned to the library the next day and obliterated his inscription.

Burns after all was a poet, not a politician. If he was stopped from writing, that would be death to him. He was right to be cautious in these matters because he had a much more powerful weapon to hand: his poetry. As we know, it was in a poem he wrote in 1795 that he inscribed the imperishable words:

*"For a' that, an' a' that,
It's comin yet for a' that,
That Man to Man, the world o'er.
Shall brothers be for a' that."*

Nor was Burns' democratic spirit reserved for men. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft had published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. While poems such as 'Ae fond kiss' and 'My love is like a red red rose' express Robert's love for women, he also put into verse his respect for them:

*“While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention”.*

Robert Burns died on July 21, 1796, at the age of 37. His health had not been good for some time, and while the exact cause of his death is not definitively known, it is widely believed that he suffered from rheumatic fever, which may have led to complications related to heart disease. By then his reputation was secure as a national poet. [Slide 18] He is buried in Dumfries.

Which brings me back to the ‘Father of Australia’, Lachlan Macquarie. It is not at all hard to see him as very much under the sway of Burns’s democratic spirit. It was he, a freemason like Burns, who made the first great official democratic statement in Australia history. It should, he said, be a basic principle, that “once a convict has become a free man he should in all respects be considered on a footing with every other man in the colony, according to his rank and character”. What could be more Scottish or enlightened!

I doubt if there is any poet in the world more honoured in stone and bronze than Robert Burns. When you go to Canberra and see the statue of Burns on National Circuit or pause to admire the handsome monument in Spring Street, not far from our State Parliament House, or the handsome statue of Burns with his dog in Ballarat, reflect on how appropriate it is that in this great democracy – right next to our Parliaments - we should honour the ploughman poet who believed in his fellow human beings.

It is an honour to be speaking next to the oldest outdoor statue of Burns with Luath in the world, commissioned by William Taylor in Edinburgh in 1830 and brought Australia in 1882 by Taylor’s son, and donated to Camperdown Public Park in 1883.

Our political life is at its best when we are working to put into practice that belief in the dignity of every person that the young genius of Scotland made his anthem over two hundred years ago.