

BARNARD

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Mr. Bernard Magdelain
1299 Palmer Avenue
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Dear Mr. Magdelain:

I am delighted to write you, officially, to say that we have had two winners of the contest for best paper related to Robert Burns. We had three submissions (not so bad, considering this was the first year), and I expect we'll get more. Two were chosen to receive the prize: "Lessons featuring the Butcher Shop," by Christina Black, and "Robert Burns and the Poetics of a Cultural Divide," by Megan Messinger. All the students were stimulated to read, write, and learn more about Burns because of your generous grant. Already it is working to stimulate interest among our students in the wonderful Burns!

I am enclosing copies of the award-winning essays for you. We can't thank you enough for the generosity of the Burns Society, and we look forward to more contact.

Sincerely,



Achsah Guibbory, Professor and Chair

Lessons featuring the Butcher Shop

Christina Black

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Graduating December 2008

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There's an illicitly gained sign from the Scotch Pie Club Butcher's Association hanging in my Upper East Side living room. Its command, "Say Aye tae a Pie!" I happily obey each time I visit Alan Learmouth's shop in the Scottish lowlands. The creamy sauce enveloping perfectly plump pieces of chicken and the flaky, buttery, golden crust is a thing of beauty and fame, such that on my last trip out to Scotland I argued with the immigration official at Edinburgh airport on whether Alan's chicken or steak and kidney pie deserved the ultimate prize. Happily, the official had an open mind, and I was still allowed to enter the country after such a passionate disagreement.

Scotland to me means meat: each time before I visit I know to overdose on salad ahead of time because the concept of edible green leaves seems to have only hit Scotland in the late 80s, and it certainly hasn't taken hold in the local imagination. Meat, on the other hand, is not only central to the Scotsman's diet, but to his culture as well. Alan knows the names of the animals he sells me to eat, telling me that the perfectly red steak comes from Rosie, who arrived from Tom Scot's farm just the other day. Sustainability here is a centuries-old practice rather than a hip new movement, as I realize that the lambs the next field over might well be on the dinner table this Saturday. Scottish devotion to tradition is hit home as I watch our otherwise regular neighbor turn shepherd during his daily walk through the fields, silently communing with his beloved sheep.

Rabbie Burns' realistic poetry taught the Scots pride of locality and tradition back when Scotland was still England's poor and uncultivated northern cousin. His poems, especially those written in Scottish dialect, are snapshots of the vivacity and gentle irony of Scottish humor. Burns, a good Scotsman, loved his meat too, and the enthusiastic, hungry sentiment of the Scottish Butcher's sign, "Say Aye tae a Pie!" strongly reminds

me to Burns' own exclamation, "if ye wish her grateful prayer, / Gie her a Haggis!" (l. 47-48). He lovingly writes in his "Address to a Haggis":

"His knife see rustic Labour dight,
An cut you up wi ready slight,
Trenching your gushing entrails bright,
Like onie ditch;
And then, O what a glorious sight,
Warm-reekin, rich!" (l. 13-18)

As is the case with this poem, the ever-present Scottish sense of humor cannot mask the utmost seriousness of purpose on broaching a favorite subject: the deliciousness of haggis.

An internet search for a haggis reveals a recipe not for the squeamish: sheep's lung (apparently illegal in the US), liver, and heart are traditional fillers, added with oats and spices into a sheep's stomach and boiled for hours. In my personal experience, it is also available in the frozen aisle of many Scottish supermarkets. According to the many Scots who have interrogated my tastes on the subject, a liking (or even tolerance) of this national dish is the dividing line between the wheat and the chafe, the strong and the weak. If Scotland is the Land of Meat, Burns places Haggis as its King.

The 200-year-old tradition of the Burns Night Supper honors the legacy of a proud rural Scotland that Burns promotes through his poetry. Haggis, unsurprisingly, steals the show at a Burns Supper, and one lucky guest has the honor of performing "Address to a Haggis" to rouse the table and set the tone for the entire evening. That Haggis serves as the centerpiece only underscores meat's centrality in Scotland as the fundamental ingredient to a party, the reason for celebration. Haggis for Burns was the meat of the people: cheap, commonly available, and quintessentially Scottish. The haggis of a Burns Supper serves as a national symbol and rallying point – even as the dinner

guests' realize that only a proud Scotsman would have the stomach to dig into a steaming plate of sheep guts.

Yet the haggis of Burns must be recognized today as only the starting point for a much larger theme that can and should be adapted to bring his message to a modern audience: taking pride of ownership in your cultural traditions, and seizing an attitude of "joie de vivre" that finds reason to party even in a lowly plate of haggis. This past February a party of Scots and American joined forces to honor Burn's tradition, and although the men wore proper kilts, the meat that brought the table together was a two-foot loin of pork. As I reflected on Burn's legacy, I had to come to the conclusion that Burns would have been proud to be the impetus even of this bastardized Scottish feast. Burns' poetry celebrates the here and now, and uplifts obscure traditions for the world to see and appreciate. I believe it was this same Burns spirit that induced Alan Learmouth to give one of his butcher shop signs to be brought over to Manhattan, so that a whole other part of the world can appreciate the tradition of his delicious chicken pies. Burns' Scotland teaches us a love for well-raised and cooked meat, which even more importantly, serves as a reminder to savor humor, importance, and enjoyment every day in unexpected places. What does this mean in practical terms, one might ask? Quite simply, such a philosophy celebrates the quality of life gained from enjoying the meat of the common people: from Rabbie's traditional "glorious" haggis, to the classic golden-brown crunchy New York slice of pepperoni pizza munched with friends in a Manhattan apartment under a sign advertising the best chicken pie in the world.