

Each year we sing the songs of Robert Burns, “for auld lang syne, we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet, for days of auld lang syne”. Each year we recite the words of Robert Burns, “this truth fand honest Tam o' Shanter, as he frae Ayr ae night did canter”. And each year we pray upon Robert Burns' *Selkirk Grace*, “But we hae meat, and we can eat, sae let the Lord be thankit”. This man, this national bard, now some 200 years passed, lives and breathes in the rituals of today. In so many ways, he speaks from his heart to ours. A ploughman's poet, living a life shared by so many other Scots of the time. He sang and drank, both a gentleman and a scallywag, he was brilliant and flawed, ordinary yet unique, and of course, special to Scotland and its people. While he had a life short lived, he lives on through our now shared songs and music, values and ideals and our faith in democracy, equality and love.

Across the years, musicians including Micheal Jackson, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and countless others have been inspired by the immortal memory of Robert Burns. Some of the great American authors have been influenced by him as well. JD Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* references the song *Comin' thro* and Steinbecks, *Of Mice and Men*, is named after a line in the poem *To a Mouse*. His poem “*A Red Red Rose*” has carried musical endeavors across generations and countries, his words translated in over 40 languages and taken quite literally out of this world. A book of his poems was carried in the pocket of astronaut, Nick Patrick, on a two week space mission, where the book orbited earth 217 times! Without a doubt, these artists share a common found love for the poet who related his work to astronauts, feminists, artists, rebels and farmers. Because whether alive in the 18th century or not Burns' words resonate with all of us.

While Burns' poetry was beautiful it often confronted the politics of the time. This man who appreciated the beauty of life was also a man of conviction. Songs such as *Scots Wha Hae* says that, "tyrants fall in every foe! Liberty's in every blow! Let us do or die!". Despite the constraints of the time and his employment in the Excise Office, Burns spread political messages through opinion pieces with his anonymous letters, poems and songs, 'camouflaging' with the mind of the people. An opponent of monarchy and slavery he became an important figure of leadership. And as his popularity grew, so did his empowerment. After the French Revolution, countries were in doubt and beginning to reshape their values. Scotland's national bard was a crucial influence in making Scotland a free and beloved country. Growing up without great privilege or wealth gave him understanding of the impact of inequalities, ironic since now his face is on the 10 pound sterling.

An interesting feature of Burns' work was his admiration and respect for women, easily avoidable for the times, and represented in poems such as *Green Grow the Rashes*. Equally, he seemed to be a ladies' man and left a long legacy of romantic poetry. His early works were songs declaring his love to local girls and he went on to have eight children with his wife Jean Armour and a further four with other women.

As a man, as a writer, and as a Scot, Burns inspired people's lives and gave a voice to their aspirations. And so we study, remember and write about him. We do so, not as some

hypothetical abstract exercise after maths or before lunch, we do so because this bard matters, to each and every one of us. The things he wrote about: a common humanity, seeing beauty in life and nature, understanding the importance of camaraderie, freedom and justice for all, these things are important, they have always counted and always will. And they especially count today, because apparently there are now such things as 'alternate facts'. The role of science and scientists to guide, improve and even save our lives is coming under question. Banality, rudeness and boorish behaviour is becoming increasingly commonplace. Burns' work reminds us that respect for each other, aspiration to higher ideals, a love for life and an embrace of our common humanity are the essence of civilised life. This is his life work, this is his great legacy and gift to us.

With this man, we see and feel things that otherwise may not have been.