

Robert Burns

1759–1796



Synopsis

- Poet Robert Burns is considered one of the most famous characters of Scotland's Cultural history. He is best known as a pioneer of the Romantic movement for his lyrical poetry and his re-writing of Scottish folks songs, many of which are still well-known across the world today. He published his first collection of poetry to raise enough money to make it to Jamaica where he hoped to find work.

Alloway

- Burns was born two miles (3 km) south of Ayr, in Alloway, Ayrshire, Scotland, the eldest of the seven children of William Burnes (1721–1784) (Robert Burns spelled his surname Burnes until 1786), a self-educated tenant farmer from Dunnottar, The Mearns, and Agnes Broun (1732–1820), the daughter of a tenant farmer from Kirkoswald, Ayrshire.
- He was born in a house built by his father (now the Burns Cottage Museum), where he lived until Easter 1766, when he was seven years old. William Burnes sold the house and took the tenancy of the 70-acre Mount Oliphant farm, southeast of Alloway. Here Burns grew up in poverty and hardship, and the severe manual labour of the farm left its traces in a premature stoop and a weakened constitution.

Alloway

- He had little regular schooling and got much of his education from his father, who taught his children reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history and also wrote for them *A Manual Of Christian Belief*.
- By the age of 15, Burns was the principal labourer at Mount Oliphant. During the harvest of 1774, he was assisted by Nelly Kilpatrick, who inspired his first attempt at poetry, "O, Once I Lov'd A Bonnie Lass". In the summer of 1775, he was sent to finish his education with a tutor at Kirkoswald, where he met Peggy Thompson (b.1762), to whom he wrote two songs, "Now Westlin' Winds" and "I Dream'd I Lay".



Inside the Burns
Cottage Museum in
Alloway

Burns Cottage in
Alloway, Scotland



Tarbolton

- In December 1781, Burns moved temporarily to Irvine, Ayrshire, to learn to become a flax-dresser, but during the workers' celebrations for New Year 1781/1782 (which included Burns as a participant) the flax shop caught fire and was burnt to the ground. This venture accordingly came to an end, and Burns went home to Lochlea farm. During this time he met and befriended Captain Richard Brown who encouraged him to become a poet.
- He continued to write poems and songs and began a commonplace book in 1783, while his father fought a legal dispute with his landlord. The case went to the Court of Session, and Burnes was upheld in January 1784, a fortnight before he died.

Mauchline

- Robert and Gilbert made an ineffectual struggle to keep on the farm, but after its failure they moved to the farm at Mossgiel, near Mauchline, in March, which they maintained with an uphill fight for the next four years. During the summer of 1784 Burns came to know a group of girls known collectively as The Belles of Mauchline, one of whom was Jean Armour, the daughter of a stonemason from Mauchline.

Love affairs

- His first child, Elizabeth Paton Burns (1785–1817), was born to his mother's servant, Elizabeth Paton , while he was embarking on a relationship with Jean Armour, who became pregnant with twins in March 1786. Burns signed a paper attesting his marriage to Jean, but her father "was in the greatest distress, and fainted away". To avoid disgrace, her parents sent her to live with her uncle in Paisley. Although Armour's father initially forbade it, they were eventually married in 1788. Armour bore him nine children, only three of whom survived infancy.



Love affairs

- At about the same time, Burns fell in love with Mary Campbell, whom he had seen in church while he was still living in Tarbolton. She was born near Dunoon and had lived in Campbeltown before moving to work in Ayrshire. He dedicated the poems "The Highland Lassie O", "Highland Mary", and "To Mary in Heaven" to her. His song "Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary, And leave auld Scotia's shore?" suggests that they planned to emigrate to Jamaica together. Their relationship has been the subject of much conjecture, and it has been suggested that on 14 May 1786 they exchanged Bibles and plighted their troth over the Water of Fail in a traditional form of marriage. Soon afterwards Mary Campbell left her work in Ayrshire, went to the seaport of Greenock, and sailed home to her parents in Campbeltown.
- In October 1786, Mary and her father sailed from Campbeltown to visit her brother in Greenock. Her brother fell ill with typhus, which she also caught while nursing him. She died of typhus on 20 or 21 October 1786 and was buried there.



Kilmarnock Edition

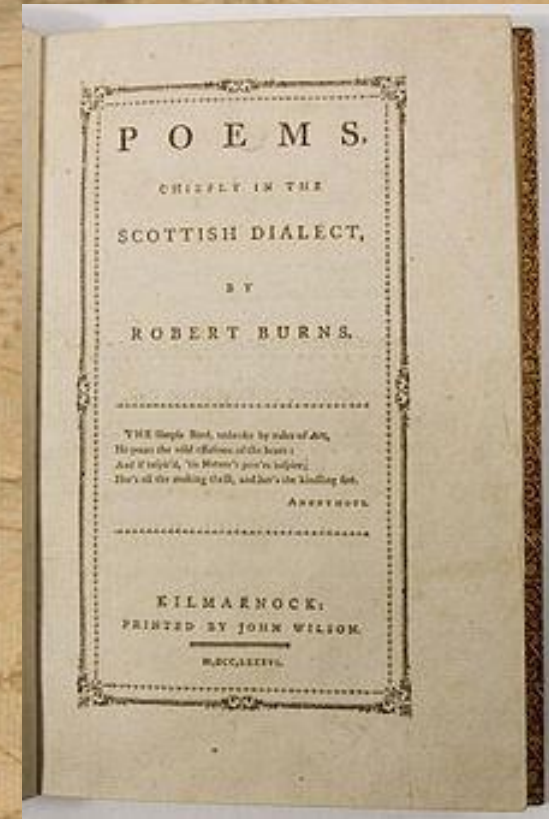
- As Burns lacked the funds to pay for his passage to the West Indies, Gavin Hamilton suggested that he should "publish his poems in the mean time by subscription, as a likely way of getting a little money to provide him more liberally in necessaries for Jamaica." On 3 April Burns sent proposals for publishing his *Scotch Poems* to John Wilson, a local printer in Kilmarnock, who published these proposals on 14 April 1786, on the same day that Jean Armour's father tore up the paper in which Burns attested his marriage to Jean. To obtain a certificate that he was a free bachelor, Burns agreed on 25 June to stand for rebuke in the Mauchline kirk for three Sundays. He transferred his share in Mossgiel farm to his brother Gilbert on 22 July, and on 30 July wrote to tell his friend John Richmond that, "Armour has got a warrant to throw me in jail until I can find a warrant for an enormous sum ... I am wandering from one friend's house to another."

Kilmarnock Edition

- On 31 July 1786 John Wilson published the volume of works by Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish dialect*. Known as the Kilmarnock volume, it sold for 3 shillings and contained much of his best writing, including "The Twa Dogs", "Address to the Deil", "Halloween", "The Cotter's Saturday Night", "To a Mouse", "Epitaph for James Smith", and "To a Mountain Daisy", many of which had been written at Mossgiel farm. The success of the work was immediate, and soon he was known across the country.
- Burns postponed his planned emigration to Jamaica on 1 September, and was at Mossgiel two days later when he learnt that Jean Armour had given birth to twins. On 4 September Thomas Blacklock wrote a letter expressing admiration for the poetry in the Kilmarnock volume, and suggesting an enlarged second edition.

Kilmarnock Edition

- A copy of it was passed to Burns, who later recalled, "I had taken the last farewell of my few friends, my chest was on the road to Greenock; I had composed the last song I should ever measure in Scotland – 'The Gloomy night is gathering fast' – when a letter from Dr Blacklock to a friend of mine overthrew all my schemes, by opening new prospects to my poetic ambition. The Doctor belonged to a set of critics for whose applause I had not dared to hope. His opinion that I would meet with encouragement in Edinburgh for a second edition, fired me so much, that away I posted for that city, without a single acquaintance, or a single letter of introduction."



Title page of the
Kilmarnock
Edition

Failing health and death

- Burns's worldly prospects were perhaps better than they had ever been; but he had become soured, and moreover he had alienated many of his best friends by too freely expressing sympathy with the French Revolution and the then unpopular advocates of reform at home. His political views also came to the notice of his employers and in an attempt to prove his loyalty to the Crown, Burns joined the Royal Dumfries Volunteers in March 1795. As his health began to give way, he began to age prematurely and fell into fits of despondency. The habits of intemperance (alleged mainly by temperance activist James Currie) are said to have aggravated his long-standing possible rheumatic heart condition. His death followed a dental extraction in winter 1795.

Failing health and death

- On the morning of 21 July 1796, Burns died in Dumfries, at the age of 37. The funeral took place on Monday 25 July 1796, the day that his son Maxwell was born. He was at first buried in the far corner of St. Michael's Churchyard in Dumfries; a simple "slab of freestone" was erected as his gravestone by Jean Armour, which some felt insulting to his memory. His body was eventually moved to its final location in the same cemetery, the Burns Mausoleum, in September 1817. The body of his widow Jean Armour was buried with his in 1834.



The death room of
Robert Burns



Robert Burns
Mausoleum at
St. Michael's
churchyard in
Dumfries.



Burns
Monument in
Dorchester
square,
Montréal,
Québec



Burns statue by
David Watson
Stevenson (1898)
in Bernard Street,
Leith

Literary style

- Burns's style is marked by spontaneity, directness, and sincerity, and ranges from the tender intensity of some of his lyrics through the humour of "Tam o' Shanter" and the satire of "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Holy Fair".
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- Statue of Burns in Dumfries town centre, unveiled in 1882
- Burns's poetry drew upon a substantial familiarity with and knowledge of Classical, Biblical, and English literature, as well as the Scottish Makar tradition. Burns was skilled in writing not only in the Scots language but also in the Scottish English dialect of the English language. Some of his works, such as "Love and Liberty" (also known as "The Jolly Beggars"), are written in both Scots and English for various effects.

Literary style

- His themes included republicanism (he lived during the French Revolutionary period) and Radicalism, which he expressed covertly in "Scots Wha Hae", Scottish patriotism, anticlericalism, class inequalities, gender roles, commentary on the Scottish Kirk of his time, Scottish cultural identity, poverty, sexuality, and the beneficial aspects of popular socialising (carousing, Scotch whisky, folk songs, and so forth).
- The strong emotional highs and lows associated with many of Burns's poems have led some, such as Burns biographer Robert Crawford, to suggest that he suffered from manic depression—a hypothesis that has been supported by analysis of various samples of his handwriting. Burns himself referred to suffering from episodes of what he called "blue devilism". However, the National Trust for Scotland has downplayed the suggestion on the grounds that evidence is insufficient to support the claim.



Statue of Burns
in Dumfries
town centre,
unveiled in 1882

Stamps and currency

- The Soviet Union was the first country in the world to honour Burns with a commemorative stamp, marking the 160th anniversary of his death in 1956.



Stamps and currency

- Burns was pictured on the Clydesdale Bank £5 note from 1971 to 2009. On the reverse of the note was a vignette of a field mouse and a wild rose in reference to Burns's poem "To a Mouse". The Clydesdale Bank's notes were redesigned in 2009 and, since then, he has been pictured on the front of their £10 note. In September 2007, the Bank of Scotland redesigned their banknotes to feature famous Scottish bridges. The reverse side of new £5 features Brig o' Doon, famous from Burns's poem "Tam o' Shanter", and pictures the statue of Burns at that site.
- In 1996, the Isle of Man issued a four-coin set of Crown (5/-) pieces on the themes of "Auld Lang Syne", Edinburgh Castle, Revenue Cutter, and Writing Poems. Tristan da Cunha produced a gold £5 Bicentenary Coin.
- In 2009 the Royal Mint issued a commemorative two pound coin featuring a quote from "Auld Lang Syne".

Burns suppers

- Burns Night, in effect a second national day, is celebrated on Burns's birthday, 25 January, with Burns suppers around the world, and is more widely observed in Scotland than the official national day, St. Andrew's Day. The first Burns supper in The Mother Club in Greenock was held on what was thought to be his birthday on 29 January 1802; in 1803 it was discovered from the Ayr parish records that the correct date was 25 January 1759.

Burns suppers

- The format of Burns suppers has changed little since. The basic format starts with a general welcome and announcements, followed with the Selkirk Grace. After the grace comes the piping and cutting of the haggis, when Burns's famous "Address to a Haggis" is read and the haggis is cut open. The event usually allows for people to start eating just after the haggis is presented. At the end of the meal, a series of toasts and replies is made. This is when the toast to "the immortal memory", an overview of Burns's life and work, is given. The event usually concludes with the singing of "Auld Lang Syne".

Greatest Scot

- In 2009, STV ran a television series and public vote on who was "The Greatest Scot" of all time. Robert Burns won, narrowly beating William Wallace.

Signature

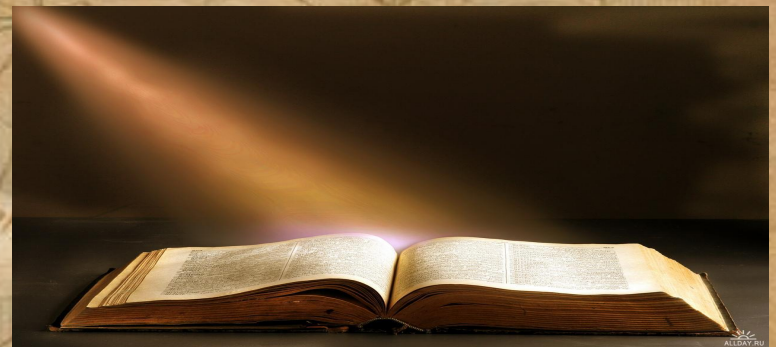
Robert Quinn

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**Thank you for your
attention!**

