

BURNS - THE MAN & BURNS — THE MASON

In January of 1970 I had the honour of being invited to attend the 100th anniversary of Robert Burns Lodge No.464 Free and Accepted Masons which meets in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. There some 1200 distinguished masons and guests met to celebrate and pay homage to Robert Burns, a great poet and mason who gave us his works as a monument to humble, honest and forthright human life.

Robert Burns was born on January 25, 1759, the first born in a family of 7, the son of an impoverished tenant farmer and nurseryman in the parish of Kirk Alloway, near the town of Ayr in Northeast Scotland. After only 2 1/2 years of formal schooling, Burns had to undertake strenuous farm work. By the age of 15 he became the mainstay of his family due to his father's failing health. The labor was often beyond Burns' endurance and left him with uncertain health for the rest of his life.

Genius, passion and adversity were his lifelong companions. Failure in business and farming continually presented to him his worst enemy - debt. But Burns did not let this poverty break his spirit. The very effort he put into the land increased his love of it and made him aware of the humble beauties of the Scottish landscape.

Although Burns was born and lived in poverty, yet in none of his works did he think poverty was degrading or disgraceful. His attitude toward poverty was completely different from that of many in America today. In one of his songs, "For a' that and a' that," we find Burns saying:

The rank is but the guinea's stamp,

The Mans the qowd (gold)
for a' that.--.....

Gie (give) fools their silks, and
knaves their wine,

A Man's a Man for a'
that....

The honest man, tho' e'er sae
(so) poor,

Is king o' men for a'
that.--

Poverty did not, according to Burns, prevent a man from being honest with himself, his God, his neighbors, his family or his country.

After the death of his father, Burns and his brother Gilbert took over the farm at Mossgeil in the Parish of Mauchline, and there he made his first contact with the Craft of Masonry. Three miles from the Mossgeil farm, in the village of Tarbolton, there were two Masonic Lodges: St. James Lodge No. 178, which was constituted by a charter from Mother Kilwinning Lodge in 1771, and St. David Lodge No. 174.

On June 25, 1781, these 2 Lodges joined to form one united St. David Lodge. Only 9 days later, on July 4, 1781, Robert Burns was initiated, paying his entry fee in full at the time. Since the fee was considerable, and considering Burns' poverty, his full payment rather than in installments as was an accepted custom, indicates his eagerness and desire to join our Fraternity.

Until his entrance in the Lodge, Burns was as he said, virtually a "Hermit", bound to endless toil with no comfort provided by friends of education and intellect. What a revelation it must have been suddenly to be accepted as an equal with such local notables as Sir John Whiteford, the owner of large estates; James Dalrymple, another of the local land and gentry; Sherrif Wallace; Gavin Hamilton, Solicitor; John Ballantyne, Provost; and Dugald Stewart, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. Here in his Lodge, fraternal comradeship would supply the education that Burns had been denied in his youth. At the age of 21, Burns was quick to benefit from the fellowship of these prominent gentlemen and his many other Lodge Brethren. As is the custom in all branches of Masonry, men of all kinds were accepted as equals and benefited one from the other.

The Brethren took a special pleasure in the songs of this young plowman-poet. Burns was soon given many responsibilities, offices in which he learned dignity of manner and expression. He was raised to the second highest office in the Lodge and on occasion he occupied the Master's Station and performed ceremonial work.

Burns' considerable activity in the Lodge was clearly based on philosophy, not status. The Lodge room was virtually bare; lacking elegant ritual paraphernalia, the Craft's Symbols were drawn on the Lodge's earthen floor and only a rough sack separated the candidate being obligated from the floor as he knelt before the Masonic Altar. Seats on the sidelines were rough, rickety and wooden. There was no soft pad or music here unless it was the lilt of one of Burns' own airs. Clearly what Burns sought was not elegance or social advancement, but Fraternal Brotherhood and Masonic Enlightenment.

Gradually, under the tutelage of his Brethren, Burns' lost the manner of a bashful, young, poor man to become the confident, eloquent poet honored around the world. Never, however, did he lose touch with the Scottish soil, its beauty and its people. His lyrics sing of lovely lasses and highland flowers, humble cottage and rustic comrades. In uniquely authentic Scottish dialect he captures the full humanity and beauty of his beloved land and people. His poems breathe a sense of dedication and patriotism. Burns

is, without a doubt, The Poet of Scotland. As importantly, he is also the poet of Freemasonry.

He took his Lodge commitments seriously, and at one point he felt St. David Lodge No. 174 of Tarbolton, the Lodge in which he had been raised, was doing less than it should in regard to charitable works. He affiliated with St. James Lodge No. 178, when it reasserted its independence and was resuscitated as Lodge St. James No. 135, Kilwinning, a Lodge that still exists and, in fact, thrives in Scotland today. In explaining the decision to leave his Mother Lodge for the new Lodge, Burns wrote: "We look on our Mason Lodge to be a serious matter, both with respect to the character of Masonry itself, and likewise as it is a Charitable Society. This last indeed, is a matter of high importance."

Evidently, content with more philanthropic work in the newly reformed Lodge, Burns brought his own brother, Gilbert, to Masonry; He being Passed and Raised on March 1, 1786.

Evidence of Burns' activity in the Lodge is clear. The Minute Book, which still exists, is sometimes written entirely in Burns own hand and, at other times, was signed by him as Deputy Master. Also, the Lodge still retains the Apron he wore and the Bible, embossed with the Lodge crest on its cover which Burns gave to the Brethern of St. James.

Returning his support, the Brethren appreciated Burns' poetry. At the suggestion of the Master of another Lodge, he visited the Loudoun Kilwinning Lodge No. 51 at Newmilns. There Burns was persuaded to collect and publish his early work. Here was truly a Masonic edition in theme and execution. Of the 600 copies published, 350 were purchased by members of St. John Lodge, Kilmarnock. In addition, the collection was dedicated to Gavin Hamilton, a Master Mason, and was printed by another Mason, John Wilson.

Unfortunately, the very first Burns collection, despite full Masonic support from several Lodges, did not net enough profits to remedy Burns destitute financial situation.

In July of 1786, Burns despaired of improving his life in Scotland and he seriously considered emigrating to Jamaica. He attended a Lodge meeting on July 29th and on the following day wrote his famous poem, "The Farewell". In it he expressed his heartfelt bond to the Craft and his grief over leaving the Brethren of St. James Lodge in Tarbolton, in part he said:

Adieu! A Heart-Warm fond Adieu!

Dear Brothers of the Mystic Tie~

ye Favour's Few.

Companions of My Social Joy!

Tho' I To A Foreign Land Must Hie,

Pursuing The Fortunes slidd' ry Ba',

With Melting Heart, and Brimful Eye.

I'll Find You Still.

Thi' Far Away'

Luckily, Burns did not pursue his desperate plan to leave Scotland. If he had, he and his work would have undoubtedly vanished. Freemasonry again came to his aid. With his luggage already on the way to be put aboard the ship, Burns accepted the earnest advice of Brother Mason John Ballantyne. He changed his mind at the last moment and went to Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, to publish a second edition of his poems.

There Burns visited Canongate Kilwinning Lodge No. 2 where he met Lord Glencairn, who interested himself in Burns' wellbeing, promoted his work among the nobility and obtained for Burns a position in the Office of Excise.

Afforded some slight financial stability by his government position, Burns performed his exacting duties well, but reserved what time he could manage to the two passions of his life: Freemasonry and Scotland. Henceforth he refused all remuneration for his poems, doing them all for Scotland's sake as a patriotic service of love. As to Freemasonry, he sustained an active Masonic involvement until just 3 months before his early death at the age of 37 in 1796. In March of 1786 he affiliated with Loudon Killwinning Lodge No. 51, Newmilns, and in October of 1786 he was made an honorary member of St. John Lodge No. 22, Kilmarnock. To honor its Master, Brother William Parker, Burns wrote a poem praising the "Noble Vocation" of the Craft expressing his wish that:

Within This Dear Mansion May Wayward Contention,

Or Wither'd Envy Ne'er Enter.

The Secrecy Round Be The Mystical Bound,

And Brotherly Love Be The Center.

Burns' enthusiasm for the Craft is evident in his several other Masonic associations. In January, 1787, he visited Edinburgh St. Andrew Lodge No. 48 and received and returned the toast: "Caledonia and Caledonia's bard, Brother Robert Burns"

In the next several years he affiliated with Canongate Kilwinning Lodge #2 in Edinburg, became a Royal Arch Mason and then, a Knight Templar. Burns was unanimously Assumed a member of St. Andrews Lodge No. 178, Dumfries where he regularly attended meetings and was elected Senior Warden on November 30, 1793. He performed the work frequently for this Lodge, only leaving the fellowship of his Brethern because of illness 3 months before his death.

This great poet and Mason gives us his works as a monument .to humble, honest and forthright human life.