Title

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Robert Burns (1759 - 1796)

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Robert Burns by Iain McIntosh © Scottish Poetry Library

### Biography

#### Summary

If ever a poet understood the character of his nation, he was Robert Burns. The language he was most fluent in wasn’t so much Scots or English – it was the language of the heart. All too human in his personal life, he carried that humanity over onto the page. Nothing was too small or too large to escape his notice, from a mouse in the mud to God in his heavens. A poet for all seasons, Burns speaks to all, soul to soul.

#### Full Biography

‘The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men  
                   Gang aft agley’

Robert Burns was born on 25 January 1759 in the village of Alloway, near Ayr. His father was William Burnes, a gardener turned tenant farmer from the north-east of Scotland, and his mother was Agnes Brown, an Ayrshire woman of farming stock. Burns’s early life was marked by constant back-breaking work on a succession of small farms, but his father saw to it that he never lacked another kind of culture. He learned the three Rs, some French and much Scripture. Added to that, he was a voracious reader and also absorbed huge amounts of traditional stories and songs from his mother and a kinswoman of hers, Betty Davidson. Poetry sprang early into his heart, at the same time as love, and his first composition was a song for the girl he partnered in the harvest. Rarely having much time to sit and ponder poems, it became his habit to compose as he worked.

His father died in 1784, worn out by the struggle to keep farm after farm going, leaving Burns as head of the family. This seemed to free him in some way and the next few years became a period of high creative energy, producing poems such as ‘To a Mouse’. He also developed a satiric strain and circulated caustic poems on local contemporaries. His reading of an earlier poet, Robert Fergusson, inspired him to think of himself as his successor ‘carrying forward and widening the range of vernacular Scots poetry’, according to D.M. Low in Robert Burns (1986).

Burns began to think of gathering his poems together for publication and approached a printer in nearby Kilmarnock. Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect was published (by subscription) in July 1786 in an edition of 612 copies. He also entertained the notion of emigrating to Jamaica. He had fallen in love with and made pregnant a local girl, Jean Armour, and her father was not best pleased. All was changed, however, by the almost immediate success of his book, taken up by the Scottish literati as the work of a ‘Heaven-taught ploughman’ (as the novelist Henry Mackenzie dubbed him). Off he went to Edinburgh to capitalise on this sudden fame, and, playing up to his new-found reputation, had a most enjoyable time being lionised by the great and the good  – he created a striking impression, not just with his poems, but by his good looks, his charm and his ease of conversation in company: it was said that he ‘glowed’.

He arranged a new edition of his poems with the Edinburgh publisher William Creech (selling his copyright for 100 guineas) and had put up in the Canongate churchyard a memorial stone to his literary hero Fergusson. He also found time to indulge in an intense but platonic relationship with a married woman, Nancy Mclehose, which in its ending produced one of his greatest songs, ‘Ae fond kiss’.

Increasingly seeing himself as ‘Scotia’s bard’, Burns embarked on several tours of Scotland, to observe the country (though as a farmer he was more interested in crops than scenery) and to absorb its history and traditions – including its songs.  He became almost obsessed with songwriting from this period on – rescuing traditional songs, rewriting their words, writing new words. He was blessed with an amazingly retentive memory. And apart from his narrative verse masterpiece ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ (1788), he devoted the rest of his life to Scottish song, contributing to two main collections, the Scots Musical Museum and A Select Collection of Scotish Airs.

There was, however, the problem of earning a living. Through a friend he was offered the tenancy of a farm in Dumfriesshire. He also, though a radical by inclination, took the King’s shilling and accepted a post as an Excise officer.  The farm was not a success and he had to fall back on the excise work, moving with his family into the town of Dumfries in 1791 (by now he had married Jean Armour and had several children).

The next few years were marked by increasing ill-health – the heart trouble he had suffered since his hard farming days allied with a rheumatic condition – and despite (or because of) a course of water treatment (immersion in the sea), he died in Dumfries on 21 July 1796, at the age of thirty-seven. His last poem – song, rather – was written for the girl who nursed him at the end (‘O wert thou in the cauld blast’) and his last child was born on the day of his funeral.

Burns has been described as a chameleon, that is, he was able to change his personality to suit the company or situation. This is best seen in his letters, where he adapts his tone to suit his correspondent, while never deviating from his lively, humorous and intelligent self. What enabled him to do this was his innate sympathy – or empathy – with people (indeed, all living creatures). He may have been admired by some more for his conversation than his poems, but it is the poems that live on and the poems which have made him such a universally loved figure, not only in the West, but in countries such as Russia and Japan.  Not even Shakespeare has as many statues to his memory, or an annual dinner in his name. Burns Suppers are celebrated every year on the anniversary of Burns’s birth.

The poems can be satirical but also full of sentiment; they deal with love and lust (Burns being well versed in these), human foibles and hypocrisies; they show a deep knowledge of and love of the natural world (especially horses, dogs, mice and lice); they can be funny and moving by turns. What makes them special is the way he writes about all of the above: his craftsmanship and use of language (in Scots and English), his skill at rhyming; his use of traditional forms in a new way. He is one of those artists (like Bob Dylan in our own time) who absorbs everything and rewrites it. Essentially you feel this is a man who knows the truth about the human condition –  whatever faults he may have had (and he admitted to plenty, especially where women were concerned) just add to that knowledge. He is truly a poet who speaks to all, a poet for all seasons. And it is not too much to agree with the great Burns scholar Donald Low (in his Robert Burns, 1986) that Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect ranks with Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794) and Wordsworth and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads (1798) in quality and importance.