

For Something Beyond: Robert Burns (1759-1796)

Robert Burns was the eldest of seven children and he was born into a poor family in 1759. His father, William who strangely came from the same area of north-east Scotland as the country's greatest novelist, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, was a small tenant farmer who moved to Ayrshire in south-west Scotland. By all accounts, he was too much of a dreamer to be a competent farmer and moved from one failed farm to another.

However, William was a self-educated man and great believer in the value of education so he spent many hours teaching his children to read and write and he somehow was able to employ a tutor for a short period to teach his eldest sons some Latin and French and introduce them to the works of Shakespeare and Milton and other great writers. Robert later had a year or so of regular schooling before leaving to work full-time on his father's farm at the age of fifteen. The long exhausting days of following a horse and plough left Robert with a permanent stoop and working in the cold winds, snow and rain caused him to suffer from rheumatic pains for the rest of his life.

Despite his exhausting toil, Burns began to write verses at the age of fifteen, largely to attract the admiration of women but the subject matter of his poetry broadened and deepened over the years. When he had been writing poetry for twelve years, a friend persuaded him to publish a collection of his poems by

subscription as a way of alleviating his desperate lack of money and to allow him to emigrate to Jamaica and take up the offered job of book keeper on a slave plantation. Like his father, Burns was too much of a dreamer to make a decent living as a farmer and he thought that emigration offered a way out of his poverty. Although this might seem a shameful step for him to take and Burns was later to celebrate the equality of all people and was a fervent advocate of the ideals of French Revolution, at that time African slaves were still viewed as being less than human.

Burns himself must have been astonished at the popularity of this Kilmarnock edition of his poems which earned him the equivalent of around thirty thousand pounds in today's value and enabled him to live for a period in Scotland's capital city. He liked to act the role of the 'heaven taught ploughman' among his wealthy admirers, who had romantic notions about the inherent nobility of peasant life, whose poetry came to him with little or no effort and this myth has survived. Burns was more widely read and more of a consummate craftsman than is often believed. The promise of a lucrative extended second edition of his poems encouraged Burns to abandon his plan to emigrate.

A related myth about Burns is that he was no more than one of the lads, a comic figure who was a drunk and a heartless lecher. Although it is true that he fathered a number of illegitimate children, he did care passionately about women. Far from being constantly cheerful, Burns suffered from periods of depression and, like

many people, he sought release from his depression in alcohol. In a letter to a close friend he wrote:

*I have been pining under
secret wretchedness . . . Even
in the hour of social mirth my
gaiety is the madness of an
intoxicated criminal under
the hands of the executioner.*

In 1788, Burns eventually married Jean Armour who bore him nine children but only three of them survived infancy. Although, after leaving Edinburgh, he returned to farming in Ayrshire's neighbouring county of Dumfries, he eventually gave up the unequal struggle to wrest a living from the land and trained as a Customs and Excise officer. He died of a rheumatic heart condition in 1796 at the age of thirty-seven.

Burns wrote in English as well as in Scots and his poem called *The Fall of the Leaf* ends with these telling lines:

*Life is not worth having with
all it can give -
For something beyond it poor
man sure man must live.*

This longing for something beyond lies at the heart of Burns' poetry. As C.S. Lewis said, a longing for some indefinable otherness is the basis for all religious feeling. However, like most people in Britain in our own time, he didn't find a home for this longing for 'something

from **The Rigs O' Barley**

I locked her in my fond embrace;
Her heart was beating rarely:
My blessing on that happy place
Amang the rigs o' barley.
But by the moon and stars so bright
That shone that hour so clearly!
She aye shall bless that happy night
Amang the rigs of barley.

I hae been blythe wi' comrades dear
I hae been merry drinking;
I hae been joyfu' gath'rin' gear
I hae been happy thinking.
But a' the pleasures e'er I saw
Tho' three times doubled fairly,
That happy night was worth them a'
Amang the rigs wi' Annie.

Corn Rigs an' barley rigs
An Corn rigs are bonnie;
I'll ne'er forget that happy night
Amang the rigs wi' Annie.



between poetry and song as he felt that a good poem is itself a piece of verbal music. And like music, even if you don't understand every word, you can still sense the feeling. One of my favourite poems by Burns is often sung, it's called '*The Rigs O' Barley*' and it's about the experience of one rare and beautiful night, the memory of which makes all other aspects of life pale into insignificance.

Burns longed to believe in something which might transcend time but his doubts and questions prevented him from subscribing to the religious dogmas of his day. In a letter written just over a year before he died, he expresses his envy of those believers who have, in his words, *a firm prop and sure stay, in the hour of difficulty, trouble and distress: and a never failing anchor of hope, when he looks beyond the grave.*

Although he could not hold onto that *never failing anchor of hope*, he did capture glimpses of eternity in romantic love which he most movingly expresses in his famous poem, again often sung, called, *A Red, Red Rose*:

O my Luv'e's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luv'e's like the melody
That sweetly played in tune.

So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luv'e am I;
And I will luv'e thee still, my
dear,
Till a the seas gang dry.

Till a the seas gang dry, my
dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only
luv'e!
And fare thee weel awhile!
And I will come again, my luv'e,
Though it were ten thousand
mile.

beyond' in the established church.

One of Burns' most lasting achievements, which involved travelling many miles on horseback in all weathers was to collect traditional folk songs which were the voice of the people who have too often remained unheard. Burns adapted many of those folk songs by adding his own words and sometimes altering the tunes. Burns was a singer as well as a poet.

He had a deep sense of the fleeting nature of time, he felt that trying to hold onto a precious moment was like trying to hold water in your cupped hands. There is a revealing verse in his long narrative poem called *Tam O' Shanter* which describes this momentary experience of pleasure:

*But pleasures are like poppies
spread,
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is
shed;
Or like the snowfalls in the river,
A moment white then melts for
ever.*

It was in the beauties of nature and in romantic love that the poet experienced glimpses of eternity in a world in which human life was so often cut short. Although his death at 37 seems young to us, that was about the average life expectancy of less affluent people in the eighteenth century and of course many children, including six of his own, died in infancy from a wide range of diseases.

It's because of this acute awareness that times of joy and visions of beauty are not going to last that Burns attaches so much importance to memory. Poem after poem evokes those rare and precious moments of love and delight which have gone. As anyone who has a friend or relative suffering from some form of dementia knows, when memory goes, a whole sense of identity seems to go along with it.

As I've mentioned, Burns wrote many songs as well as poems but he really didn't distinguish