

Chieftain, Consul General, Ladies and Gentlemen – it is a great honour for a wee lad from Ayrshire to be invited to toast the memory of Robert Burns by the society that has meant a great deal to me ever since we moved to Houston over twenty years ago. As I frequently say, coming to Houston was our best decision ever, and we have always been made most welcome here.

When thinking about my theme for tonight I naturally turned for advice to the people with whom I have studied and enjoyed Burns all the time I've been a member of this Society. It was Arthur Down who when I needed a haggis for a Burns Supper at home in January 1988 said OK, but only if you join Heather & Thistle and come to our event in the Shriner's Temple to collect the haggis. And that is how it all began for me. No one will be surprised to hear Arthur's advice for tonight – keep it exactly to the allotted time.

Thanks to the leadership of Jack Hume, the founder of our Burns Club, the Heather & Thistle Society, on its 50th Anniversary in January 2003, presented as a gift to the City of Houston the Robert Burns Bust located in the Rose Garden in Hermann Park. I'll never forget going the following year with Jack to the United Nations in New York to hear Secretary General Kofi Annan on Burns, and in a few weeks' time we are hosting the first Burns Cruise out of Galveston. One night at a Burns Supper Jack whispered to me – I wish I had fifty bucks for every speaker who started out by saying Burns was not really a drinker or a womanizer, he just couldn't help it, because there was no TV or Internet and nothing else to do in those days. So I won't go that way tonight!

But as ever the best input I got was from my lovely wife Irene. She and our three daughters have always been there for me on our adventure in Houston, and I'm delighted to say the extended Boyd family is all here tonight. Irene and I were driving over to Austin about 15 years ago to give my first Immortal Memory at a large supper in the United States, and I wasn't sure how to pitch the speech. One of the great things about Irene is that she always gives practical down-to-earth advice. She said to me – don't forget, the audience isn't here to hear about you; they are out to have a good time and hear some Burns in an authentic accent. Sounds right on the mark for tonight as well.

As a Scot abroad, the first thing most people say on meeting you is something like – I just love that accent, where are you from? Or more tellingly, please don't ever lose that

accent. Don't worry, there's no way, because we don't want to lose the accent. We are proud of our heritage, certainly, but in addition, my point tonight is that we have Robert Burns to thank for making it socially acceptable and even desirable to be recognizably Scottish.

There have been times when it has almost been sexy to be Scottish. In our era, Sean Connery started it, and I believe that his secret was the sly humour that just like Burns he injected into his roles all the way from those early Bond movies in the sixties to his cameos today. I remember about ten or twelve years ago there was another Scottish phase when the Braveheart and Rob Roy movies came out. At that time I was playing golf out at Katy one Saturday morning, and when I bought a soda at the ninth hole the girl at the booth said – I just love your Scottish accent. Surprised someone so young didn't hesitate and got it right I said – how did you know I'm Scottish? She came back immediately - because you sound just like Mel Gibson! Come to think of it maybe it wasn't such a compliment that Hollywood cast a bigoted Aussie and a wimpy Irishman as our Scottish heroes Wallace and Rob Roy!

Just before Christmas, Helen Mann, our local joke collector and my back-up tonight, circulated a number of one-line jokes that work "only in Scotland". They all depend on the Sots accent, and most can't be repeated in this polite company, but they did remind me of the wide variety of dialects that exist in Scotland. For example the Kelvinside district of Glasgow thinks itself very posh, and to distinguish themselves the residents adopt an excruciating version of Glaswegian that we normal folk refer to as *pan loaf*. Anyway the substitute geography teacher walks into the class at Kelvinside Academy for the first time. She starts the lesson – today we are going to discuss a very important port in Belgium – OSTEND. She hears a commotion and is surprised to look up and see all her pupils duly standing to attention....

Robert Burns was born almost 250 years ago in rural Ayrshire, near Glasgow on the southwest coast of Scotland. His father was a poor farmer, but Robert, largely self-educated, soon began to write poetry and songs and his first collection the Kilmarnock Edition was published when he was 27 years old. He went on to conquer Edinburgh society and published two more volumes of his work there before returning to his roots and dying at only 37 years old. He became famous in his home country during his short life, and my thesis tonight is that Robert Burns with his humour, patriotism, politics and

yes a perhaps a wee bit of drinking and womanizing was instrumental in building the positive Scottish image of which we Scots are all so proud.

Humour is all through Burns's work. He is at his very best when drily poking fun at people's weaknesses, including his own. Listen to him on the Tarbolton Lasses.

*As ye gae up by yon hillside,
Look in on bonnie Bessy;
She'll give you a beck, and bid you light,
And handsomely address ye.
There's few so bonnie, none so good
In all King George' dominion
If you should doubt the truth of this,
It's Bessy's own opinion.*

Even more biting is Burns on the church. He himself was a man of strong religious beliefs, but he hated the hypocrisy of the men of the cloth. Jack Hume gives a memorable performance of Holy Willie's Prayer that should be compulsory viewing for any aspiring clergyman. Here is the climax.

*Lord, hear my earnest cry and pray'r
Against that Presby'ry of Ayr!
Thy strong right hand Lord, make it bear
 Upon their heids
Lord, visit them and dinna spare
 For their misdeeds.
But lord, remember me and mine
Wi' mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace an' gear may shine
 Excell'd by none
And all the glory shall be Thine –
 Amen, Amen!*

Amen indeed.

Patriotism and love of the beauty of his country was one of the Bard's strongest emotions. He loves to stir us up like this:

*Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed
Or to victorie!
Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front of battle lour,
See approach proud Edward's power –
Chains and slaverie!*

A wee bit of bashing of the English doesn't hurt either

He also loved to describe the beauty of his native land, and to me his poems set in Ayrshire are the core of Burns.

*Ye banks and braes of Bonnie Doon,
How can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?
How can you chant, you little birds,
And I so weary, full of care!
Thou'll break my heart, thou warbling bird,
That wantons thro' the flowering thorn!
Thou minds me of departed joys,
Departed never to return.*

Like many Europeans Burns's politics were by today's standards quite left-wing, none too popular in Texas lately, but maybe we'll see a change come November???

The common man, his values, virtues and his rights were the basis of some of Burns's greatest works. When we gather round the Bust in Hermann Park tomorrow to honour the Bard, there is no question that this poem, from which a quote is inscribed on the handsome plinth, will be performed:

*Is there for honest poverty,
That hangs his head and all that?
The cowards slave , we pass him by –
We dare be poor for all that!
For all that, and all that,
Our toils obscure and all that ,
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gold for all that.
Then let us pray that come it may
(As come it will for all that)
That Sense and Worth o'er all the earth
Shall bear the gree and all that!
For all that and all that,
It's coming yet for all that,
That man to man the world o'er
Shall brothers be for all that.*

Sentiments like this have made Burns highly popular with politicians everywhere, and that is one of the main reasons that Burns Suppers like this are being held world wide over the next few days. Two of the greatest US statesmen had Burns connections. Benjamin Franklin made a number of trips to Scotland including his first visit to Edinburgh in 1759, the year Burns was born, and the friends he made then were instrumental in the publication of the Edinburgh Editions of Burns's works. Franklin later became a big Burns fan himself. Abraham Lincoln obtained his first book of Burns's

works at the age of 18 and was a lifelong enthusiast. He gave the Immortal Memory at a Burns Supper in Springfield Illinois to mark Burns 100th anniversary in 1859, just two years before Lincoln was elected President.

Burns did appear to enjoy a good drink. There is no way that Tam O'Shanter, arguably his greatest work, could have been written without experiencing many a long night at the pub like this.

*One market night
Tam had got planted unco right,
Fast by the fireside, blazing finely
With reaming swats, that drank divinely;
And at his elbow, Souter Johnie
His ancient, trusty, drouthy cronie;
Tam loved him like a very brother,
They had been fou' for weeks thegither.
The night drove on wi' songs and clatter;
And ay the ale was growing better...*

There are a number of Robert Burns's poems that allude to the importance of his "muse", who was said by the poet himself to be both elusive and essential to his art. It seems quite likely that the muse was none other than Auld John Barleycorn – Scotch Whisky.

*Leeze me on drink! It gives us more
Than either school or college
It kindles wit, it wakens lore,
It pangs us fou o' knowledge:
Be't whisky-gill or penny wheep
Or any stronger potion,
It never fails, on drinkin' deep,
To tickle up our notion,
By night or day*

Nevertheless one has to believe that Burns exaggerated his own consumption. The evidence of the huge body of high-quality work that he wrote in his sadly-shortened life is ample proof of his work ethic.

On top of all that we've left the best to the last. Burns loved the ladies, and they clearly adored him. Tonight we'll hear Charles sing Burns's most famous love song - Red, Red Rose. But there are so many others. Here are some unforgettable lines from Ae Fond Kiss:

*I'll ne'er blame my partial fancy
Nothing could resist my Nancy!
But to see her was to love her,
Love but her, and love for ever.
Had we never lov'd so kindly,
Had we never lov'd so blindly,
Never met – or never parted –
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.*

Or from my own particular favourite – Mary Morison.

*Oh Mary at thy window be!
It is the wish'd, the trysted hour.
Those smiles and glances let me see,
That make the miser's treasure poor.
How blithely wad I bide the stoure,
A weary slave from sun to sun,
Could I the rich reward secure –
The lovely Mary Morison!*

But as with the drink, a study of Burns reveals him to have been a man of honour who shouldered his responsibilities and looked after those he loved. Listen to him on the arrival of one of his children born out of wedlock.

*Welcome, my bonnie sweet wee daughter,
Tho' you come here a wee unsought for
And tho your coming I have fought for
Both kirk and quire
Yet, by my faith ye're no unwrought for
That I shall swear.
Wee image of my bonnie Betty
As fatherly I kiss and pet ye
As dear and near my heart I set thee
With as good will
As all the priests had seen me get thee
That's out of Hell.*

So there we have it. A remarkable talent whose supreme achievements have boosted Scotland's image to the point where we Scots are proud to remain so, no matter where in the world we roam. And we do meet a lot of wannabe Scots along the way as well. I hope that we've added a few more converts tonight!

Ladies and Gentlemen, please be upstanding and raise your glasses. The toast is to *The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns*.