

1998

Burns in Beirut

Tom Sutherland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sutherland, Tom (1998) "Burns in Beirut," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 30: Iss. 1.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol30/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Tom Sutherland

Burns in Beirut

Introduction by Kenneth Simpson:

As we know, Burns means many things to many people. For our next speaker, he has a very particular significance. It gives me a great deal of pleasure, and it is an honor, to introduce Professor Tom Sutherland. Born in Scotland, and a graduate BSc. Agriculture, of Glasgow University, he was no mean footballer or perhaps we should say soccer. Tom Sutherland made the move which Burns contemplated, that is to say he crossed the Atlantic, he came West. At Iowa State University, he took master's and doctor's degrees, and subsequently became Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. In 1983, with his own Bonnie Jean, he moved to the American University of Beirut as Dean of Agricultural and Food Sciences. The rest I think we may say is a remarkable personal history of immense heroism. Burns celebrated heroism, Burns suffered adversity, not on the scale that Tom Sutherland did. Burns championed liberty, and Tom Sutherland more than anyone, must know what freedom really means. Perhaps one has to lose freedom to really know what it means. And for Burns, as for Tom Sutherland, the kinship of one's fellow beings was all important. Above all, Burns celebrated the human spirit. It is my privilege to introduce a man who represents the human spirit at its very finest.

Thank you Ken. I am so pleased to be here even if I don't bring you the Ayrshire accent like Ken's. My accent is Stirlingshire, corrupted by four years in Glasgow, followed by a year in Reading, four years in Iowa, twenty-five years in Colorado, and eight and a half years in Beirut. When I was in Glasgow we had fun with the Glasgow accent and I quoted some of it in

2 Tom Sutherland

Glaswegian to Jack Webster of the *Glasgow Herald* and he did not understand what I was saying! I told him “I’ll gie ye three we re head, twa wi re bannet oan and wan wi it aff!” which being interpreted means “I’ll give you three with the head, two with the bonnet on, and one with it off!” which to a Glaswegian represented different degrees of severity; whether it was more severe with it on or off, I am not sure, but that was a standard kind of threat in Glasgow! Then Stanley Baxter was in great vogue at that time, and his monologues had in them such great phrases as, “Ah bashed ma tae oan a knoat in the flerr,” or in other words “I bashed my toe on a knot in the floor” in the dance hall at the Barrowland where Stanley used to go and listen to all of those Glasgow accents. Or otherwise, being asked to dance, a young lady would reply to the man who was asking her, “Och, hey, dance wi ma sistur. Ah em swettin.” Then we used to tell the story about the Aberdonian who came down from Aberdeen, and tried to get on to a tram car in Sauchiehall Street to go to Charing Cross, with a big suitcase in tow. The conductress said, “Thatull be sixpince sur!” “NO, it’s no. It’s just thruppence to Charing Cross.” “Wi a suitcase like that sur, it’s sixpince.” “No, it’s thruppence.” “It’s sixpince!” “It’s thruppence,” “It’s sixpince,” until the tram car started to move and the conductress unceremoniously took the suitcase and threw it off. Along comes a bus, and barely missed the suitcase! Said the Aberdonian, “Is it no enough yer trying to overcharge me, but now you’re trying to kill ma wee boy!”

I stand before you here very humbly in the presence of such people as Ross Roy, Ken Simpson, Donald Low, Kathleen Kerrigan, Jim Mackay, Carol McGuirk, Bob Thornton, Esther Hovey...these are all giants in this field of Burns scholarship, while I’m an agricultural geneticist and really an amateur in this area, albeit an enthusiastic amateur. But if you will accept me on this basis, I have a little tale to tell you, and I am grateful to Dr. Ross Roy for inviting me here to tell it. I’ll start at the end, that is on November 20 of 1991, a day or so after I was released from captivity or, as I sometimes refer to it, my extended paid vacation with room and board thrown in and daily room service, all courtesy of Islamic Jihad. I had come together with my family in Wiesbaden and had agreed to do a press conference to the world’s TV cameras. Now other hostages had never been willing to talk much when they came out—they had been so nervous, and just said “Thanks to Syria and Iran, and thanks to everyone who prayed for me,” and zip they were gone. The world’s TV cameras had come half way and sometimes all the way around the world to get a little bit of a story, and said I to Terry Anderson, “I am a college prof and when I get out of here, I am going to tell them I’m used to fifty minutes and really give them a story!” “Don’t do that man,” said Terry, “They’ll eat you up. Those men are nasty. I know, I was one of them. Say the minimum, and get out of there.” No way. So there in Wiesbaden when we were going into the conference, I said to my wife Jean, “How should I open this?” And she said, “Well, how about a quotation from Burns?” So I did some “Tae a Mouse” with its “best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft aghley...,” so ap-

ropos to my case. And many, many Scots heard it for it was literally going all over the world. I've had letters from South Africa, from Japan, from Australia...they all had heard me that day quote Burns. What a truly global language Burns is.

So how did my Burns in Beirut story really all begin? I was the Dean of Agriculture at the American University of Beirut, as Ken just told you. I enjoyed that job for two years and would have stayed on. But Islamic Jihad cut that short by kidnapping me on the 9th of June of 1985. I was sure at the time that it wouldn't be very long—just be a day or two or a week or a month at the most and the U.S. government or the Lebanese government or the Board of Trustees of the American University of Beirut would get me out of there—because they were very powerful people; I wasn't really terribly worried. If somebody had told me at that time "You'll be in there for 6½ years, chained to the wall and screamed at and cuffed and pushed around" I would have said, "No, I couldn't take that, I'd rather die." But it turned out to be that—2,354 days which translates into 77 months or 6½ years and any way you count it, it's a long time. I was in sixteen different locations, nine of them in Beirut, four of them in south Lebanon up the hill from the Biblical village of Tyre, and three of them in the Bekaa Valley right near the Roman ruins at Baalbek. I had always wanted to go to Baalbek to see those ruins. But in my time there I never saw them—in fact I never saw daylight all that time, let alone the ruins in Baalbek.

Ten of the cells were above ground but always the windows were blocked over with steel sheets that were riveted to the window frames. Six of the cells were underground, regular prisons built in the basement with cinder block walls and big steel doors. Relatively small cells, six feet by four feet by six feet high and fortunately I'm not six feet tall so my head didn't scrape the ceiling. We were chained most of the time to the wall, sometimes to the floor or a radiator depending on which kind of room we were in; blindfolded all the time that the guards were in the room. Rule number one was "Thou shalt not see the guards in any way, shape or form" because they were very paranoid about the CIA. We had forty-five different guards of whom thirty-five or so were reasonable young men who were doing it for money for Mr. Khomeini to try to get rid of the West, out of Lebanon and out of all the Middle East, so he could put a fundamentalist Islamic type government into power into the whole Middle East. I think he had aims to do the same in Germany and France and Britain and then into the U.S., and eventually take over the whole world with his Islamic government. Frankly, I don't see that that would work very well—it hasn't worked very well where they have Islamic forms of government. He was a little over-ambitious.

Of the other guards, half a dozen of them were really nasty and they gave us a lot of tough times. These tended to be the smallest of the guards—the biggest of them never touched us. The biggest of all was maybe six feet, strong, but not heavy for they were not very well fed from South Lebanon.

They took us to the toilet once a day, ten minutes at a time, to empty the bottle we urinated in, defecate, wash our hands, wash our face, brush our teeth, wash our underwear (if we dared) and then they were at the door, banging on it with their Kalashnikovs and saying “Yella, Yella” which means “Let’s go, get on with it.” They fed us pita bread and processed cheese and a rotten cup of tea every morning and evening, breakfast and supper; lunch was the hot meal of the day with rice and beans. Frankly, I never liked rice very much, beans even less. I’m a meat and potatoes man. Being an animal scientist, I like steak and pork chops and lamb chops and all, but we never got any pork chops for sure, Islamic fundamentalists not being very high on pork. We never even got any beef except for small bits in the beans once in a while to flavor it. But Ben Weir, the Presbyterian minister who had been for thirty years as a missionary to South Lebanon told us “For those young men, bread is food and food is bread”—that’s the equation and anything they give you in addition to bread is a luxury. So they thought they were feeding us well when they gave us cheese with our bread and rice and beans. Ben said, “They’re treating you very nicely in their view!” I said, “Ben, I’ve got news for them—I’ve got different ideas....”

Five of those 77 months I was in isolation but the rest of the time I was with Terry Anderson—70 of the 77 months. I got to know him very well—I told him I knew enough about him to get him convicted three times over and that he was no substitute for my wife and he said, “No, but I know you about as well as she does!” I was also with Ben Weir, the Presbyterian minister, Father Martin, the Catholic priest who came to hand out millions of Catholic dollars from Catholic Relief Services to South Lebanon and for that they kidnapped him. Ben Weir likewise. Terry Anderson was there trying to do objective reporting and for that they kidnapped him. Frank Reid we were with as well for a short time; John McCarthy, the young Englishman, and Brian Keenan the Irishman, Jean-Paul Kauffmann and Marcel Carton, the Frenchmen, I was with as well, and then finally Terry Waite, the English representative of the Church of England, though not an ordained priest of the church. I had never had too much respect for journalists, especially in contrast to a dean...but I lost every argument I had with Anderson and he didn’t even have a master’s degree; I thought that was unfair. Jean-Paul was very very bright also—he didn’t speak any English at all...“donc, je lui ai appris l’anglais et nous avons parlé en français tout le temps tout le temps parce que moi je sais parler un peu le français; donc c’était possible.”

I’m thankful for those people I was with for that was salvation.

Isolation—I think that is the worst thing you can do to a human being. Certainly for me it was the worst. Together we devised all sorts of things to keep ourselves alive and from going insane. I seemed to have succeeded because my daughters said to Jean when I got home—“Gee, Mom, he’s still the same old Dad, even the things we hoped would be different are still the same!” We did all kinds of things to keep our minds going. Terry Anderson grew up

in a family of six as I did and we argued and argued and argued and we taught each other all kinds of things. One of the things I gave them, willing or unwilling they got it, was Burns on the 25th of January every year. 1986 was the first one and at that time Ben Weir had gone home but we were still four together: Father Martin, David Jacobsen, Terry and I. I started telling them about Burns Suppers. They knew a little about Burns but not very much. So I described the Suppers and recited a little of "Tam o' Shanter" to Terry. When I came to the bit

We think na on the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps, and styles,
That lie between us and our hame,
Whare sits our sulky sullen dame,
Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.

how that image appealed to Terry of the wife nursing her wrath and he roared with laughter and Father Martin and David Jacobsen got a big kick out of it. That lightened our spirits a little and we needed it, for just three weeks before on Christmas eve, we had had the news on the BBC world service from a radio we had very intermittently at that time, that Terry Waite had gone home. We had such high hopes that he would get us out and you can just imagine what that did for us. So here on January 25th we had Burns to perk us up.

The most interesting Burns Night of all was in 1988 a year or two later when I was with Jean-Paul. I wrote up that experience at their request for the *Sunday Times* in London for their Scottish edition and it says, "How Burns Got Me Through Beirut by Former Hostage Tom Sutherland." I describe the scene there up the hill from Tyre—a small two-room apartment in a small village in South Lebanon, three of us captives of Islamic Jihad lying on mattresses of foam rubber, chained by the wrist at that time to the wall separating us from the guardroom with the kind of chain you normally use to chain dogs. My two companions, Marcel Carton, the protocol officer from the French Embassy in Beirut, and Jean-Paul Kauffmann, the very distinguished French journalist. All of us were hostages for 32 months and I had just joined them a couple of months before. I was on the left side with my left shoulder right by the door which went back through into the guard room, Marcel lying right in the middle and Jean-Paul on the other side. Lunch had just gone off, cold in there in our ragtag pajamas and even with four blankets it was still pretty cold. A single 100 watt bulb in the ceiling with no shade, drab bare walls, cheaply constructed run-down apartment, not very inspiring. BUT it was the 25th of January. "Jean-Paul," I said, "tu connais le poète écossais Robert Burns?" ("Are you acquainted with the Scottish poet Robert Burns?") All our conversations were in French.) "Yes," he answered, "I've heard of him but I can't claim to know very much about him." "OK, let me introduce you to him," I said, "I know A LOT about him.... This is the 229th anniversary of his birth and we Scots al-

ways celebrate his birthday with a supper no matter where we are—all over the world. Main dish is Haggis, washed down with plenty of Scotch whiskey.” “Ah, I’ve heard of Haggis but haven’t tasted it,” said Jean-Paul, “but the Scotch whiskey—ooh, la, la! Ça je connais bien!” “Well now, there’s much more to the supper—toasts, music, Burns poetry, the main toast to the Immortal Memory. We celebrate his life and recite his poetry, how it is still relevant to us today two hundred years later....” Jean-Paul’s eyes lit up. Keenly intellectual, he had read most everything written it seems, except Burns, and had an absolutely incredible memory. I began to recount tales of Burns’s life and to describe his poetry all in French—must say it’s a truly formidable task to translate Burns into French—even the English have a hard time understanding him! But we had plenty of time—the only thing we had an abundance of in those cells was time. The more Jean-Paul heard, the more animated he became. Then came our evening meal—the Burns Supper of 1988. Bad tea and pita bread. Marcel Carton prayed but even he couldn’t transform pita bread into haggis or cold tea into wine let alone whiskey. But our supper flowed over his praying body and by now the chains no longer counted. Jean-Paul and I were roaming free through the fields of Ayrshire, hearing Tam yell out, “Weel done, Cutty-sark!” charging across the Brig o’ Doon where Tam’s mare lost her tail, plowing the field in November where the mouse’s nest was turned up, and watching Afton Water flowing by us. Later, into the drawing rooms of the Edinburgh literati and finally down to Dumfries where he had collected his songs and where Rheumatic Fever finally killed him two hundred years ago. Burns’s escapades with the lassies, both before and after his marriage to Jean Armour, particularly appealed to Jean-Paul’s French concept of the ideal lover. We laughed and giggled...and then were brought back to reality by the guards who were hissing at us so offensively, warning us to keep our voices down. No matter—years later, Jean-Paul would tell the world in Glasgow, “Though the captors could chain our bodies to the wall, they could not chain our spirits.”

The bleakest supper of all was in January of 1987. I was alone for they had stuck us into isolation in a place we called The Prison with underground cells of concrete and hard tile floors. Our treatment at that time was about as bad as they could make it, probably I think in retaliation for Irangate, though we knew nothing at that time about Irangate. For me, that January 25th, no books, no Bible, no urine bottle even—they were even deciding when we could urinate—four times in twenty-four hours, and I invite you all to try that! —nothing save a thin foam rubber mattress, and my mind, and Burns was there filling my mind, for it was his birthday, and I simply had to acknowledge it in the best way I could. I began to recite his poems, all those that I had memorized over the years, the “To a Mouse,” “To a Louse,” “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” “Robert Bruce’s march to Bannockburn,” “John Anderson my Jo,” “A red red Rose,” “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” “Afton Water” (Flow gently sweet Afton), what I could recall of “The Twa Dogs,” because I had never learned that one all the way, “Comin thro’ the rye,” “Rantin’ rovin’ Robin” (There was

a lad was born in Kyle), and on and on. “Tam o’ Shanter” took the longest, trying to fit all those couplets into place. I’d get down a ways, then I would say to myself, “no that’s not right” so I would start over again, and I have recited it many times to literature classes in college and high schools but had never completely learned it, but then I kept going and kept up the effort a long time in the blackness of that cell. I didn’t even have any light in there, my mind functioning with difficulty at this time of greatest hardship of all those six and a half years, (Terry Anderson agrees with that—he too says that was the toughest time) everything had to be done in my head. Then I thought of all the hardships that Burns had endured in his life and the kind of treatment that he had had at the hands of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland in his period, with its chastisement and humiliation for sought-out sinners—not too different from what I was going through at the hands of Islamic Jihad, a self-styled religious organization—it gave me comfort and strength. But Burns at least had his women, and I wondered how he would have fared without any contact with the fair sex for nearly twenty months as I had had up to that time!

Well, again and again in the blackness and isolation of that cell Burns brought me joy and comfort in my own time of trial and despair. Graphic in my mind was my first ever Burns Supper. The year was ’48, my fifth year (or junior year as they say in America) at Grangemouth High School. I was going on seventeen—our English teacher, Pearl McKeown, had organized it and asked me to be the master of ceremonies. I borrowed a kilt from a member of the Muirheads’s World Champion Pipe Band, cycled the five miles back to school with bare knees on a cold January night, and my good friend Frank Donnan, no athlete but an incredibly talented artist who went on to do great things in that field, recited “Tam o’ Shanter” from beginning to end from memory and I promptly forgave him all his failings in football and elevated him ten notches in my admiration scale. He was wonderful, and gave me forever a heightened appreciation of that marvelous poem.

It was amazing, too, that Jean told me afterwards of the celebrations each January 25th of that time that I was in captivity, when she had into our home on the campus of the American University of Beirut the English Department faculty and students and she told the students, “You can’t graduate without knowing something about Robert Burns.” Most of them were native Arabic speakers so it was about as difficult for them as it had been for Jean-Paul Kauffmann, but that last year she played a cassette tape of one of the toasts to the Immortal Memory that I had given to the Colorado St. Andrew Society years before, and she wrote to our daughters about how touching it was to have Tom present along with Robert Burns—you cannot believe—the students were visibly moved at this evidence of the living link between us. And each year too, Jean put messages in the *As-Safir*, the leftist newspaper read by my captors, every Valentine’s Day, birthday, wedding anniversary, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving and Christmas—I didn’t get them all, but on my 59th birthday (1990) the guards brought me her message, “I send you this day the best gift I

have, a red red rose of love...” and thus did Burns’s poem link us that day in shared love and memory through our favorite poem, as she had known it would. It would be only a year and half later in January of 1992 that she and I would sit together among the gathered folk at the West Sound Burns Supper in Glasgow and receive the gift of a real red red rose, and hear Kenneth McKellar sing that song for us, the first time he had sung it since the death of his dear wife. Tears had to flow. Kenneth has always been special to us for bringing to our ears and to our hearts the glorious songs of Burns and of our beloved Scotland. Jean told me afterwards how she had listened through our tapes to choose two songs to send to me through the BBC’s “Anything Goes” with Bob Holness—that last September before my release in November—there came Kenneth McKellar, his marvelous voice bringing her “My love is like a red red rose” and “Westering Home,” ringing out: Jean had chosen her songs. Duly they came to me in that cell by the Roman ruins in Baalbek in the Bekaa valley of Lebanon, and I cried unashamedly with the absolute beauty of it. (I’m nearly crying now!) What a Scottish treasure, and what a Scottish loveliness the songs of Burns. And into my mind that day came the words of McNichol that I had quoted often in *Immortal Memories* that I had given in years gone by:

Let who will make the laws, Burns has made the songs which her emigrants recall, in which maidens are wooed, by which mothers lull their infants, which return through open casements unto dying ears, they are the links the watchwords, the Masonic symbols of the Sots race.

As an emigrant, as one of the Scots race, I cherish the songs as I do the poems. As I do Burns the man with his consummate genius who sees clearly into the nature of man, his weaknesses, his strengths, and his place in the nature of things. In freedom now, I celebrate this man who died two hundred years ago, but who lives so vibrantly in my mind and heart, as a lifeline to me in my darkest hours. And a continuing joy in the best days now in my life. It is true what Professor David Daiches told me as we made the film “Burns in Beirut,” for January of 1993, as we talked about the power of Robert Burns to sustain a fellow human being. David said to me, “You proved it on the pulses.”

*Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Emeritus*