

1998

## How Robert Burns Captured America

James M. Montgomery

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



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

---

### Recommended Citation

Montgomery, James M. (1998) "How Robert Burns Captured America," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 30: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol30/iss1/25>

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](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

*James M. Montgomery*

## How Robert Burns Captured America

Before America discovered Robert Burns, Robert Burns had discovered America.

This self-described ploughman poet knew well the surge of freedom which dominated much of Europe and North America in the waning days of the eighteenth century. Burns understood the spirit and the politics of the fledgling United States. He studied the battles of both ideas and infantry.

Check your knowledge of American history against Burns's. These few lines from his "Ballad on the American War" trace the Revolution from the Boston Tea Party, through the Colonists' invasion of Canada, the siege of Boston, the stalemated occupation of Philadelphia and New York, the battle of Saratoga, the southern campaign and Clinton's failure to support Cornwallis at Yorktown. Guilford, as in Guilford Court House, was the family name of Prime Minister Lord North.

### I

When *Guilford* good our Pilot stood,  
An' did our hellim thraw, man,  
Ae night, at tea, began a plea,  
Within *America*, man:  
Then up they gat to the maskin-pat,  
And in the sea did jaw, man;  
An' did nae less, in full Congress,  
Than quite refuse our law, man.

## II

Then thro' the lakes *Montgomery* takes,  
 I wat he was na slaw, man;  
 Down *Lowrie's burn* he took a turn,  
 And *C-rl-t-n* did ca', man: [Carlton  
 But yet, whatreck, he, at *Quebec*,  
 Montgomery-like did fa', man,  
 Wi' sword in hand, before his band,  
 Amang his en'mies a', man.

## III

Poor *Tammy G-ge* within a cage [Gage  
 Was kept at *Boston-ha'*, man;  
 Till *Willie H—e* took o'er the knowe [Howe  
 For *Philadelphia*, man:  
 Wi' sword an' gun he thought a sin  
 Guid Christian bluid to draw, man;  
 But at *New-York*, wi' knife an' fork,  
 Sir Loin he hacked sma', man.

## IV

*B-rg—ne* gaed up, like spur an' whip, [Burgoyne  
 Till *Fraser* brave did fa', man;  
 Then lost his way, ae misty day,  
 In *Saratoga* shaw, man.  
*C-rnw-ll-s* fought as lang's he dought, [Cornwallis  
 An' did the Buckskins claw, man;  
 But *Cl-nt-n's* glaive frae rust to save [Clinton  
 He hung it to the wa', man.<sup>1</sup>

In one of his satires Burns had Beelzebub lament the ambitions of some emigrating Highlanders bound for North America.

I doubt na! they wad bid nae better  
 Than let them ance out owre the water;  
 Then up amang thae lakes an' seas  
 They'll mak what rules an' laws they please.

Some daring Hancocke, or a Frankline,  
 May set their HIGHLAN bluid a ranklin;  
 Some Washington again may head them,  
 Or some MONTGOMERY, fearless, lead them;  
 When by such HEADS an' hearts directed:

---

<sup>1</sup>"Fragment" in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 49-50. Henceforth *Poems*.

Poor, dunghill sons of dirt an' mire,  
May to PATRICIAN RIGHTS ASPIRE;  
(“Address of Beelzebub,” *Poems*, I, 254)

But nowhere did Burns state so emotionally, so emphatically—almost treasonably—his love of liberty than in these lines from his “Ode for General Washington’s Birthday”:

See gathering thousands, while I sing,  
A broken chain, exulting, bring,  
And dash it in a tyrant’s face!  
And dare him to his very beard,  
And tell him, he no more is feared,  
No more the Despot of Columbia’s race.

\* \* \*

But come, ye sons of Liberty,  
Columbia’s offspring, brave as free,  
In danger’s hour still flaming in the van:  
Ye know, and dare maintain, The Royalty of Man.

Alfred, on thy starry throne,  
Surrounded by the tuneful choir,  
(*Poems*, II, 732-3)

If Robert Burns had a love affair going with the principles of American liberty, surely the people and the poets on this side of the Atlantic have returned the affection for more than two centuries.

Within a year after the 1787 Edinburgh edition of his poems, American editions—piracies—were published in both Philadelphia and New York. Ever since we have adopted the beauty, the humor and the wisdom of Robert Burns as part of our own culture and our own idiom—often, even usually, without knowing the source in Scotland’s ploughman poet. We lament “the best laid plans of mice and men”; we wish we could “see ourselves as others see us”; we declare “our love is like a red, red rose” and annually we bellow the question of whether old acquaintances should be forgot—and only occasionally wonder what the hell an “auld lang syne” might be. The high school student who dismissed the importance of Shakespeare might have said the same of Burns: “I don’t see what’s so great about him; all he did was string a bunch of famous sayings together.”

Biographical records are replete with the influence of Burns on our country’s famous men. Indeed, one gets the idea that Burns-and-the-Bible was a standard part of every nineteenth century traveling kit.

In 1867 the young naturalist John Muir, who later was to found the Sierra Club, made his “Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf”—walking from Wisconsin to Florida. Climbing the Cumberland Mountains on a lonely trail near the

Kentucky-Tennessee border, he accepted the offer of a passing horseman to carry his pack to the top of the rise. Muir realized too late the intent was robbery and ran after the rider as he rounded a bend.

When he thought I was out of sight [wrote Muir] I caught him rummaging my poor bag. Finding there [little more than] a copy of Burns poems, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and a small Testament, he waited for me, handed back my bag and returned down the hill, saying he had forgotten something.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham Lincoln discovered the power of Burns somewhere on the Indiana-Illinois frontier at a young age. He developed an affection for Burns which he carried throughout his life. Milton Hay, who studied law under Lincoln in 1840, recalled:

He could very nearly quote all of Burns' poems from memory. I have frequently heard him quote the whole of 'Tam o' Shanter', 'Holy Willie's Prayer' and a large portion of 'Cottar's Saturday Night' from memory. He had acquired the Scottish accent and could render Burns perfectly.<sup>3</sup>

By Burns's centennial birthday, January 25, 1859, there were at least fifteen Burns Clubs in the United States. They and various Scottish groups as well as ad hoc committees sponsored centenary celebrations in more than sixty locations from Boston to San Francisco, from St. Paul to Mobile. In the southern United States, at Charleston, a full-dress military parade led celebrants to St. Andrews Hall for the occasion. Reports from Savannah asserted the event "was celebrated here by a fete the most brilliant in every respect that ever transpired in this state."<sup>4</sup> Baltimore, Washington, Natchez and New Orleans all reported their Burns events. The observances ranged from genteel gatherings in homes to multiple galas in the meeting halls of major cities. The head table would boast the area's outstanding men of letters and civic life. In New York the renowned pulpiteer Henry Ward Beecher was the principal speaker before three thousand people at the Cooper Union. At the New York Burns Club's meeting author and poet William Cullen Bryant was the featured speaker. There, too, while responding to a toast "to the press," *New York Tribune* founder Horace Greeley (of "Go west, young man" fame) remarked:

---

<sup>2</sup>John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Dunwoody, GA, 1969), pp. 17-18.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Alexander G. McKnight, "Abraham Lincoln—Robert Burns," *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, XVIII (1943), 30. Henceforth Lincoln.

<sup>4</sup>James Ballantine, ed., *Chronicle of the Hundredth Birthday of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh & London, 1859), p. 603. Henceforth *Chronicle*.

In its hour the Press has owed much to Burns. It has learned to take the side of the friendless against tradition and against the privileges of the higher classes. This character it owes to the spirit of Robert Burns....The Peasant Poet—great in what he has done for the unprivileged million—greater in what he has taught them to do for themselves (*Chronicle*, p. 590).

For pomp no city exceeded Chicago, where, despite the weather, tens of thousands witnessed a review of all the area's colorful militia units and military bands followed by the city fathers, the Odd Fellows, the Knights Templar, the Masonic Lodge, the St. Andrews Society and the Citizens Fire Brigade. Later almost three thousand crowded Metropolitan Hall to hear orators in praise of Burns. The evening ended with a banquet and ball. Nearby, at a much smaller observance in Springfield, the *Daily State Journal* reported that Congressman Abraham Lincoln responded to one of the toasts. Unfortunately they never followed through on their promise to print his words.

But for enduring prestige no one could touch the Burns Club of Boston. There in the nation's cultural center, the dais was shared by Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Some question whether John Greenleaf Whittier attended or submitted a poem to be read. It is worth hearing again what Emerson said that night when responding to the primary toast:

[Burns] has given voice to all the experiences of common life; he has endeared the farm-house and cottage, patches and poverty, beans and barley; ale, the poor man's wine; hardship, the fear of debt, the dear society of weans and wife, of brothers and sisters...and finding amends for want and obscurity in books and thought...*he has made that Lowland Scotch a Doric dialect of fame. It is the only example in history of a language made classic by the genius of a single man.*<sup>5</sup>

Lowell presented two poems that night. In one he chipped away at the tendency of many Victorians, whose praise of Burns always followed a preamble to decry his supposed social and moral transgressions. In Lowell's dream Burns arrives at heaven only to find "Holy Willie" on temporary duty at the gate, backed up by many of the elect:

So, when Burns knocked, Will knit his brows,  
His window-gap made scanter,  
And said, "Go rouse the other house,  
We lodge no Tam O' Shanter!"  
"We lodge!" laughed Burns, "now well I see  
Death cannot kill old nature,

---

<sup>5</sup>*Celebration of the Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Robert Burns, by the Boston Burns Club. January 25th, 1859* (Boston, 1859), pp. 36-7. Italics mine. Henceforth *Celebration*.

No human flea but thinks that he  
May speak for his Creator!" (*Celebration*, p. 56)

\* \* \*

Old Willie's tone grew sharp's a knife;  
"Imprimis, I indict ye,  
For makin' strife wi' the water o' life  
And preferrin' *aqua vitae*."  
Then roared a voice with lusty din,  
Like a skipper's when 'tis blowy,  
"If *that's* a sin, *I'd* ne'er ha' got in,  
As sure's my name is Noah!"

Sly Willie turned another leaf,—  
"There's many here ha'e heard ye,  
To the pain and grief o' true belief,  
Say hard things o' the clergy!"  
Then rang a clear tone over all,—  
"One plea for him allow me,  
I once heard call from o'er me, 'Saul,  
Why persecutest thou me?"

To the next charge vexed Willie turned  
And, sighing, wiped his glasses,—  
"I'm much concerned to find ye yearned  
O'er warmly tow'rd the lasses!"  
But David cried, "Your ledger shut,  
E'en Adam fell by woman,  
And hearts close shut with if and but,  
If safe, are not so human!" (*Celebration*, p. 57)

Then, a voice from above:

"They make Religion be abhorred  
Who round with darkness gulf her,  
And think no word can please the Lord  
Unless it smell of sulphur;  
Dear Poet-heart, that childlike guessed  
The Father's loving-kindness,  
Come now to rest! thou didst His hest,  
If haply 'twas in blindness!" (*Celebration*, p. 59)

Even if absent, Whittier perhaps had the strongest credentials to be on the stage that evening. The abolitionist poet had long credited Robert Burns with launching his career as a poet. As a fifteen-year-old New England farm boy, he had been given a volume of Burns by a teacher. It not only inspired him to become a poet, it gave him his ticket off the dreaded farm. Unable to attend the

banquet in Boston, Whittier sent a letter to the assembly in which he speaks of Burns as “the truest and sweetest of all who have ever sung of home, and love, and humanity” (*Celebration*, p. 61). He also enclosed a poem which was read by Emerson. I take a stanza from it:

To-day be every fault forgiven  
Of him in whom we joy;  
We take, with thanks, the gold of heaven  
And leave the earth's alloy.  
Be ours his music as of Spring,  
His sweetness as of flowers,  
The songs the bard himself might sing  
In holier ears than ours. (*Celebration*, p. 62)

For the 1859 celebration Holmes had written the second poem of his for a Burns night. In 1856 he offered these sentiments:

The lark of Scotia's morning sky!  
Whose voice may sing his praises?  
With Heaven's own sunlight in his eye,  
He walked among the daisies  
Till, through the clouds of fortune's wrong,  
He soared to fields of glory  
But left his land her sweetest song  
And earth her saddest story.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of Robert Burns continued past that nation-wide celebration. As President Lincoln attended a Burns Night at the Washington Burns Club and was asked for an extempore toast to Burns, his quickly penciled notes read:

I cannot frame a toast to Burns. I can say nothing worthy of his generous heart and transcending genius. Thinking of what he has said I cannot say anything which seems worth saying (Lincoln, p. 34).

Years later John Hay confirmed that respect for the poet. He remembered Lincoln reading from Burns and then commenting that he “never touched a sentiment without carrying it to its ultimate expression and leaving nothing further to be said” (Lincoln, p. 33). We can only speculate on the influence of Robert Burns's poetry on the powerful, terse prose Lincoln used to rewrite American government in the Gettysburg Address.

Nor was love of Burns divided by the Mason-Dixon Line. Shortly after returning from his second recuperative, post-War trip to Europe, former Con-

---

<sup>6</sup>Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*. 13 vols. (Boston, 1892), I, 241.

federate President Jefferson Davis delivered the St. Andrews Day address in Memphis. He recalled his thrill at visiting in 1874 the sites related to the "sweet plough-boy poet" and sitting—so he was told—in the very chair where Tam o' Shanter drank with Souther Johnie.<sup>7</sup> Hudson Strode tells us this about Davis:

When Davis made a pilgrimage to the thatched birthhouse of Robert Burns, his favorite poet after Shakespeare, at Alloway just outside Ayr, a surprise awaited him. On his arrival he noticed that the two lady custodians, great-nieces of the poet, regarded him with a strange, fluttering interest, though [his companion, the poet & editor Charles] Mackay gave no indication of his companion's identity. When they led him into an inner room where stood the curtained bedstance in which the poet had been born, to his amazement he saw, beside a portrait of Burns, a framed likeness of himself. Bemused, he turned a questioning glance from the photograph to the smiling pair. "We read in the papers," one of them said, "that Mr. Jefferson Davis was in Scotland, and we felt sure that he would be coming to pay his respects to Robert Burns some day, so we prepared a little welcome."

\* \* \*

Because of his life-long love of Burns, the sight of the River Doon carried special overtones for Davis, as did the town of Kilmarnock, where the first edition of his verse was printed. In a day of half-mist and half-August sunshine, all Ayrshire suggested an idyll to Jefferson Davis.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the person on this continent who most closely shared the spirit of Robert Burns was no poet at all. Mark Twain often made reference to Burns in his works and in 1880 addressed the Burns Night gathering in Chicago. Walt Whitman also shared many of the attributes of Burns. In *November Boughs*, an essay written between 1886 and 1888, he mused:

Dear Bob! Manly, witty, fond, friendly, full of weak spots as well as strong ones—essential type of so many young men—perhaps the average—of the decent-born young men...not only of the British Isles, but America too. North and South, just the same. I think, indeed, the best part of Burns is the unquestionable truth he presents of the perennial existence among the laboring classes, especially the farmers, of the finest latent poetic elements of their blood.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Letter to Mrs. S. A. Ayres of Keokuk, Iowa, dated 19th Aug. 1874. See *Jefferson Davis: Private Letters 1823-1889*, ed. Hudson Strode (New York, 1966), p. 399.

<sup>8</sup>Hudson Strode, *Jefferson Davis Tragic Hero; The Last Twenty-Five Years 1864-1889* (New York, 1964), pp. 349-50.

<sup>9</sup>Walt Whitman, *Complete Prose Works* (New York, 1915), pp. 397-8. Henceforth *Prose Works*.

Whitman dismisses “Dear Bob’s” attempts at philosophy or morality, but affirms:

Only when he gets at Poosie Nansie’s celebrating the ‘barlee bree’ or among tramps, or democratic bouts and drinking generally (Whiskey and freedom gang thegither) do we have in his own unmistakable color and warmth, those interiors of the rake-helly life and tavern fun...jolly beggars in highest jinks...brawny amorousness, outvying the best painted pictures of the Dutch School, or any school (*Prose Works*, p. 399).

Vastly popular in his day, James Whitcomb Riley wrote in the many dialects of nineteenth-century America—Italian, German, Negro, Irish, Scot. Often humorous, he grew sentimentally serious when addressing Robert Burns in a stanza form made famous by him:

Sweet Singer that I loe the maist  
O’ony, sin’ wi’ eager haste  
I smacket bairn-lips ower the taste  
    O’ hinnied sang,  
I hail thee, though a blessed gaist  
    In Heaven lang!

For, weel I ken, nae canty phrase  
Nor courtly airs, nor lordly ways,  
Could gar me freer blame, or praise,  
    Or proffer hand,  
Where “Rantin’ Robbie” and his lays  
    Thegither stand.

\* \* \*

Wi’ brimmin’ lip and laughin’ e’e,  
Thou shookest even grief wi’ glee,  
Yet had nae niggart sympathy  
    Where sorrow bowed,  
But gavest a’ thy tears as free  
    As a’ thy gowd.<sup>10</sup>

Burns lives in public monuments in obscure and prominent spots of cities all over the nation. Steel-magnate-turned-philanthropist Andrew Carnegie did his bit to promote the memory of his native soil’s great poet. It is said that in each of the 2,500 or so public libraries he endowed he placed a bust of Burns. Fame and appreciation are fleeting, however. My informal survey of several Carnegie-funded libraries revealed no knowledge of such artifacts.

---

<sup>10</sup>James Whitcomb Riley, “To Robert Burns,” *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), pp. 160-61.

Joel Chandler Harris, creator of the Uncle Remus stories, claimed a second-hand influence from our poet. He drew a parallel between Burns and Irwin Russell, a southern writer who died in 1879, but not before he pioneered the genre Harris was to make famous. Russell, he claimed, was the first writer to "appreciate the literary possibilities of the negro character," and he acknowledged Burns as his master. Russell saw in the slave a folk figure whose simplicity and unrestrained response to life were similar to those of Burns.

James Kennedy had served in the kilt-wearing 79th New York Highlander Regiment during the War Between the States. Both his poetry and his use of Doric speech drew unstinted praise from the Scottish press. But when the Burns Statue was unveiled in Central Park he couched his tribute in standard English and urged the Bard to:

See where thronging thousands stand  
In reverence to thee:  
The witching charm—the magic wand—  
The matchless minstrelsy!

They see in monumental bronze  
Thy manly form and face;  
They hear in music's sweetest tones  
They spirit's grander grace.

And though from many lands they came,  
To brotherhood they've grown,  
By thee their pulses throb the same,  
Their hearts are all thy own.<sup>11</sup>

The 1896 centenary of the death of Burns brought forth a renewed adoration for the poet. Fresh editions of his poems were published. Across the country new Burns Clubs sprang up in many cities—including ours in Atlanta. At the turn of the century two "world's fairs" in the United States paid tangible tribute to Burns. A replica of the poet's birthplace was constructed of spack and timber for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. Dismantled, it was shipped to Portland for the Lewis and Clark Expo the following year. There it disappeared, probably swept out without ceremony among all the other temporary structures.

Burns clubs all over this continent have had their poets of local note. Some doubtless enjoyed the ephemeral flash of true brilliance. Most probably warmed to the applause of their fellows assembled, mellowed with the glow of fellowship and of John Barleycorn. The Burns Club of Atlanta, a hundred

---

<sup>11</sup>James Kennedy, "To the Shade of Burns," *The Complete Scottish and American Poems of James Kennedy* (New York, 1920), p. 9.

years old in 1996, has had its share—perhaps more—of local bards. Two especially deserve mention.

Journalist Frank Lebbey Stanton was the first Poet Laureate of Georgia—indeed his was the first time that title had been granted to anyone in this nation. His work, saccharine and sentimental by today's standards, was popular in both books and daily press for several decades. Some, such as "Mighty Lak a Rose," was set to music, recorded and widely sung. Stanton's "A Night With Bobby" was his birthday tribute at the Atlanta Club's Burns Night in 1898.

Stanton's friend, ex-Confederate major, writer, musician, artist, bibliophile, Charles Hubner, went so far as to publish a small volume of his poems in praise of Burns. On page one is the poem he read November 5, 1910. It was at the cornerstone laying ceremony for America's most ambitious memorial to the poet, the National Register replica of the Burns Cottage, the beloved home of the Burns Club of Atlanta.

Here, henceforth, will be holy ground,  
A consecrated spot,  
A shrine for pilgrims, far renowned;  
For here in true similitude,  
As if in Ayr it stood,  
The lowly peasant cot  
Under whose roof, one golden morn,  
Burns, the world's best loved bard, was born.

Here will his loyal lovers meet,  
Upon his natal day  
To lay their love gifts at his feet,  
To listen to his matchless lay,  
In speech and song to sound his praise,  
And wreath his brow with bay,  
And hail, each heart with pride aflame,  
The starlike splendor of his name.

Great son of Fame! Crowned King of Song!  
Show, then, thy Heavenly powers;  
In spirit come to join the throng  
Who meet to keep thy memory green.  
Sit in their midst, felt, though unseen,  
And grace the festal hours;  
Stay with them, till Dawn's golden gleam  
Dispels the glamour of their dream.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Mary Hubner Walker, *Charles W. Hubner: Poet Laureate of the South* (Atlanta, 1976), p. 120.

For 85 years his prophecy has proved correct. In 1928 93-year-old Major Charles William Hubner was named "Poet Laureate of the South."

Moving on through the twentieth century we can pause at St. Louis, where in 1923 a member read the poem Edgar Lee Masters wrote especially for the Burns Club of St. Louis. It opens:

Robert Burns was poor, Robert Burns was proud,  
Robert Burns knew love and hate.  
Robert Burns was a brave man who was bowed  
Under the bludgeon blows of fate.  
And changeable as air was Robert Burns:  
He saw that everything had many sides,  
Truth as the wind, and soul the vane that turns,  
And love the ebb and return of tides.<sup>13</sup>

Masters suspected his audience might find those and the following lines less inspired than his "Spoon River." The covering letter with the poem read:

Not up to the standards of "Spoon River"! Well, who in hell ever wrote a poem for a dinner, an occasion, that was inspired? I make no claims to distinction...for these verses...but just send them to you...with the hope...they will add to the event.

The same comments might have been made by Lowell, Riley, Holmes and other composers of occasional poems. But for true inspiration, try this:

*That hero my allegiance earns  
Who boldly speaks of Robert Burns.*<sup>14</sup>

So wrote Ogden Nash in "Everything's Haggis in Hoboken or Scots Wha Hae Hae":

*I have an inexpensive hobby—  
Simply not to call him Bobbie.  
It's really just as easy as not  
Referring to Sir Wally Scott,  
But many, otherwise resolute,  
When mentioning Burns go coy and cute.  
Scholars hip-deep in Homer and Horace  
Suddenly turn all doch-an-dorris;*

\* \* \*

---

<sup>13</sup>Edgar Lee Masters, "Robert Burns," *St. Louis Burnsians: Their Twentieth Anniversary and Some Other Burns Nights* (St. Louis, 1924), p. 56.

<sup>14</sup>Ogden Nash, *The Private Dining Room and Other Verses* (Boston, 1952), p. 104.

*Conventioneers in littered lobby  
Hoist their glasses in praise of Bobbie;  
All, all Burns-happy and Bobby-loopy,  
They dandle him like a Scotian kewpie.  
I'll brush away like gnats and midges  
Those who quote from Bobbies Southey and Bridges;*

\* \* \*

*I'd even attempt to save from drowning  
Maidens who dream of Bobbie Browning;*

\* \* \*

*But of Robert Burns I'm a serious fan,  
He wrote like an angel and lived like a man,*

\* \* \*

*Well, I'm off, before I break the law,  
To read Tommy Hardy and Bernie Shaw.<sup>15</sup>*

What is the difference between our feelings for Burns and for the other great poets of the English language? Surely we admire the beauty of Keats' and Browning's poetry. We marvel at the unmatched word-play of Shakespeare. But it is the work we praise, not the worker. Burns is different. He struck the right chord with a cocky young nation, glorying in its emphasis on individual freedom. Burns above all the figures of literature is "one of us."

Walt Whitman came close to the answer: "Robert Burns remains in my heart as almost the tenderest, manliest, and (even if contradictory) dearest flesh-and-blood figure in all the streams and clusters of by-gone poets" (*Prose Works*, p. 407).

But it took a humorist, a popular composer of light verse, to boil down to its essence the reason Robert Burns captured America:

"He wrote like an angel—but he lived like a man."

That might be a good place to wrap up this American love affair with Rab the Rhymer. But I want you to go back with me almost a century and a half to a Burns Night supper as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow rises to recite his composition for the occasion:

I see amid the fields of Ayr  
A ploughman, who, in foul and fair  
Sings at his task  
So clear, we know not if it is

---

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 104-5.

The Laverock's song we hear,  
Nor care to ask.

\* \* \*

Touched by his hand, the wayside weed  
Becomes a flower; the lowliest reed  
Beside the stream  
Is clothed with beauty; gorse and grass  
And heather, where his footsteps pass,  
The brighter seem.

He sings of love, whose flame illumines  
The darkness of lone cottage rooms;  
He feels the force,  
The treacherous undertow and stress  
Of wayward passions, and no less  
The keen remorse.

\* \* \*

But still the music of his song  
Rises o'er all elate and strong;  
Its master-chords  
Are Manhood, Freedom, Brotherhood,  
Its discords but an interlude  
Between the words.<sup>16</sup>

The final stanza is the reason I saved Longfellow until last. It might well have been both invocation and benediction for each session of this amazing bicentenary conference:

His presence haunts this room to-night,  
A form of mingled mist and light  
From that far coast,  
Welcome beneath this roof of mine!  
Welcome! this vacant chair is thine,  
Dear guest and ghost!<sup>17</sup>

*Atlanta*

---

<sup>16</sup>“Robert Burns,” *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston and New York, 1894), p. 397.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*