

'Robbie Burns'

Laura Spence 10th. January 2018

On this occasion the speaker was Laura Spence who gave a very interesting talk entitled 'Robbie Burns, His Life, Loves and Legacy' Burns is regarded as Scotland's national poet and that country celebrates their famous son on 25th January so it was appropriate that the talk took place during this month.

Our speaker began by telling us that she was introduced to the poet by her grandmother. Burns was born in Alloway in Ayrshire on 25th January 1759, hence the date of Burns night and died at the age of 37 in Dumfries on 21st July 1796. Essentially he was born into poverty, rose to be the great poet of Scotland but could not cope with the fame and turned to drink and women.

Burns was born into a farming family in Alloway south of Ayr. He was the oldest of seven children. When he was seven the family moved to another farm a few miles away from Alloway. Here he grew up in poverty and hardship and the severe manual labour of the farm left its traces in a premature stoop and a weakened constitution. He got much of his education from his father but later got some private tuition and also attended the local parish school.

By the age of fifteen he was writing his first poems. However he continued to work on the family farm but when his father died in 1784 Robert and his brother Gilbert moved to another farm at Mauchline. While living there, Robert came to know a group of girls known as the Belles of Mauchline. He began a number of love affairs which produced a number of children. In 1796 he fell in love with Mary Campbell. It was thought that they planned to emigrate to Jamaica but Mary died of typhus. Burns still planned to emigrate but lacked the funds to do so.

To raise money he published a book of his poems. This proved so successful that he abandoned his plans to go to the West Indies and to stay in Scotland and pursue his poetic ambitions. To achieve this he moved to Edinburgh. He set out for the city in November 1786. His book of poems was published the following April. He was received as an equal by the city's men of letters and was a guest at aristocratic gatherings. He made a great impression on all he met. The new addition of his poems bought Burns £400.

While in the city he had relationships with a number of women though none of them lasted. He also contributed about 200 new songs to the Scots Municipal Museum. However after about a year in Edinburgh he returned home and resumed his relationship with one of the Belles of Mauchline, Jean Armour. They moved to Dumfries where Burns returned to farming but also taking a job with the Customs and Excise in 1789. He gave up farming in 1791 and moved into the town of Dumfries. There he continued

to write poems and songs.

Burns worldly prospects were perhaps better now than they had ever been but he had become soured and had alienated many of his best friends by expressing sympathy too freely with the French Revolution and the then unpopular advocates of reform at home. As his health began to give way he began to age prematurely and fell into fits of despondency. He died on the morning of 21st July 1796 probably of a rheumatic heart condition. He left behind him his wife Jean and twelve children. Through them Robert Burns has over 600 descendants in the world today.

Today Burns is remembered in the annual Burns' Night celebrations held on his birthday on the 25th January. The celebrations don't just take place in Scotland but throughout the world, in Canada, the United States, New Zealand and anywhere indeed where Scots had settled. In Russia he remains popular. He became the 'people's poet' of that country. The Soviet Union issued a stamp to him in 1956. Over 600,000 copies of his poems were sold in that country.

There are a large number of Burns memorials and statues around the world. A replica of his birthplace cottage stands at the Burns club in Atlanta Georgia. Royal Mail has issued postage stamps featuring the poet; the Isle of Man and Tristan da Cunha have issued sets of coins, and the Clydesdale Bank in Scotland has issued a £5 note featuring Burns' picture. In Northern Ireland many clubs celebrate Burns night and the Linen Hall library has a statue of the poet, one of 60 in the world.