

NV Grand Lodge Short Lecture Series

ROBERT BURNS the POET and FREEMASON

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Many have heard of Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland. He was a famous poet and lyricist, and also a Freemason, who was a vocal supporter of the American and French Revolutions. His most famous work is Auld Lang Syne. The very mention of the name "Robert Burns" brings to mind images of red roses, starry-eyed lovers, Tam-O'-Shanter and the Cutty Sark, and the glens of bonnie Scotland. And while these images describe Scotland's "ploughman poet" to some extent, There is another side of Burns that is not as well known: Burns the radical-- Burns, the supporter of the French Revolution--Burns, the critic of Religious hypocrisy and Puritanism--Burns, the Freemason.

While this image may not be as comfortable with many as the love-struck yeoman bard is, Burns echoed the sentiments of many of his day, calling for "liberty, fraternity and equality", and speaking out against the excesses of the secular, as well as religious establishment.

Robert Burns was initiated on 4 July 1781, at the age of 23, five years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. He was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason on 01 October 1781. He was a mason for approximately 15 years, dying at age 37 in 1796. His brother Gilbert followed his footsteps, and Robert was present when Gilbert was raised to the degree of Master Mason in 1786.

Robert Burns Day is traditionally his birthday, 25 January, but we are meeting today with a Robert Burns and Scottish theme to pay homage to one of Scotland and Freemasonry's greats.

He was raised in a household frustrated with the power structures of the religious and political institutions of the time, and found solace and inspiration in the fraternal and cultural experience of Freemasonry, and was very widely liked and recognized by the brethren, and was toasted by the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Scotland at a meeting they both attended. He drew heavily on the support of his brothers during times of great emotional and spiritual duress, and they in turn encouraged his growth and continuance of poetry.

Sadly, few people are aware that Robert Burns was a Freemason and remained so all of his adult life, indeed he was Senior Warden of Lodge St Andrew, Dumfries, (dormant) when he died. however, the physical and mental toll of his hard life, plus growing financial burdens, weakened him, and in 1796, Burns died of rheumatic heart disease, caused by his lack of a healthy diet in his younger years (Fox, p.7, McLeod, p.171).

However, physical and financial matters were not the only things that troubled Robert; The Kirk of Scotland (The Presbyterian Church) and it's opposition to his lifestyle was another. In particular, Burns's sexual escapades caused much hostility between him and the church. Burns fathered a number of illegitimate children, including one by his future wife, Jean Armour, the daughter of a Master Mason. Burns wanted to marry Jean; her father refused and Burns and Jean appeared for penance in church to "receive public reproof for the sin of fornication"(Dachies, p.36; Boot; McLeod, p.165). Burns would continue his rampant sexual activities right up until several years before his death. He never stopped his literary war against Scottish Calvinism, and lampooned it in a number of poems, including "Holy Willie's Prayer", "The Holy Fair", and others.

Besides his rather libertine actions with women, Burns was also a political radical, and a rather strange mix at that. From reading Scottish history, Burns became an ardent nationalist, writing many romantic ballads about Scottish attempts to secure their independence from the English, from Robert the Bruce to Bonny Prince Charlie. This can be seen in poems like "Scots wha Hae", "Charlie is My Darling", "The White Cockade", and many others.

Even fewer people are aware of the Masonic content of his work. One of his most famous: A Man's a Man for a' That, was sung at the official opening of the new Scottish parliament and delivered superbly by folk singer Sheena Wellington from a balcony overlooking the debating chamber. Freemasons, especially Scottish Freemasons, all over the world are intensely proud that a Masonic Anthem was chosen to mark this historic occasion.

Reciting Robert Burns Selkirk Grace at our meal.

Selkirk Grace

Some hae meat and cannae eat
Some wad eat that want it
But we hae meat and can eat
So sae the Lord be thankit

References

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