

The following article was originally delivered at the RBANA 2013 Conference as the Immortal Memory to Robert Burns, by a member; Leslie Strachan of Bedford Virginia.

Burns and North America

In the extraordinary letter that Robert Burns wrote to John Arnot in 1786, he included a subscription bill for his proposed book of poems. He also went on for four pages to tell him of his grief and state of mind over being rebuked by James Armour and of the loss of his wife Jean. Considering he had never met Arnot before or at least professed not to know him, and in truth little is known of him, the letter goes on to become an incredible candid and revealing look at his state of mind at this time, and shows Burns at his letter writing manic best. At times amusing and bawdy he tells why he had to marry Jean, and in truth felt he was married to her, but we know that Jeans father James Armour had Burns' marriage document destroyed and forbid Jean to see him.

“Sad and grievous, of late sir, has been my tribulation and many and piercing my sorrows. I have lost, sir, that dearest earthly treasure, that greatest pleasure here below, that last, best gift which completed Adam’s happiness in the garden of bliss. I HAVE LOST-I HAVE LOST- my trembling hand refuses its office, the frightened ink recoils up the quill, I HAVE LOST-A-A-A- A WIFE!”

He continues on for a few more pages stressing to Arnot his condition at the time and that he was **“Nine parts and nine tenths, out of ten stark raving mad, That he was Like a screaming ELK in the vortex of a Moscow storm and --Wait for it--- like a FEEBLY STRUGGLING BEAVER DOWN THE ROARING NIAGARA!!!**

I bet some of you were wondering where I was going with this, but how could I not include such a reference tonight as we celebrate the Bard on the banks of that same mighty Niagara. But in truth it does lead me in the direction I would like to talk tonight, Burns in North America.

For the last twenty five years I have had a small used book business, which allows me to add to my own passion for collecting. I often consider it a great Easter egg hunt, when I visit a small library or collection of books for sale. In most cases it entails taking all the books and not just cherry picking the best. So I spend a couple of hours or less looking over the collection and decide what they might be worth to me, make an offer and in most cases end up with a truck load of books most of which are of very little value and will end up at a charity shop or Goodwill store or the local library book sale. But in amongst the dross usually lies a diamond or two to make it all worthwhile and profitable. And even better is when I discover a jewel that I knew nothing of when making my bid.

But what has always surprised me; rarely do I obtain a collection and not find the Works of Robert Burns in some edition or other. Usually dating to the 19th century and most published in the United States but often enough copies from Scotland and England. Most date to that heyday

of the Burns movement in North America when Robert Burns was still taught in colleges and even in the curriculum of high schools, a time when he was read and admired by all.

If we remember that the Kilmarnock edition was published in 1786 and the second edition in Edinburgh the next year was followed twelve months later with the first North American edition in 1788 in Philadelphia, we realize how quickly RB had gone from obscurity to worldwide recognition and fame. **And of course this was only the beginning, the 19th century would see the full blossoming of the Burns cult across North America. No greater reminder of this or proof is to be found in parks across the continent from Atlanta to Vancouver, San Francisco to Toronto where there are more full size larger than life heroic statues of Robert Burns across Canada and America than are to be found in all of Scotland and England.**

In 1859, the centennial year and the very height of the Burns movement there were almost a hundred large public celebrations across America and Canada, certainly not the least of which were the 1600 people who celebrated in Halifax Nova Scotia. Go back to the old Chronicles and look at the list of clubs and societies on the roll of the Federation that covered this continent, sadly most are long gone but others like **Winnipeg and Atlanta still strong and vibrant.**

It has often been said of Burns that he is the most universal poet a poet of the World and not just of Scotland. Published in more than fifty languages even taught in Schools in Russia as if one of their own, **but no country outside of his own claimed him more, than did America, nor sings his praise with more vigor. For RB exemplified everything that that young country stood for.**

Born in 1759 a mere 14 years after the battle of Culloden where Scotland had last tried and failed to gain back its independence from England, and only 17 years before America would gain its own independence from that same country.

Born into a poor tenant farmers family, the oldest of seven children, his life would always be a struggle. Educated by the will and meager resources of his father who above all valued the worth of education for his children. He created in his short 37 years poems and songs that would stand the test of time and still be recited and sung today. When he died on July 21, 1796 he was still close to poverty but he was not forgotten, ten thousand people flooded the streets of Dumfries and stood ten deep in the rain to watch as his body was carried to St Michaels church yard for burial. Only a short ten years before he had published that most famous of books **POEMS CHIEFLY IN THE SCOTTIS DIALECT**, 613 copies, now rightly regarded as one of literatures most important books. Followed the next year in Edinburgh and then America. The

volumes published in Philadelphia and NY were not aimed at the Scottish immigrant but at the general American audience, Since the previous year 1787 when the Edinburgh edition had come out the Philadelphia papers had been printing his poems on a weekly basis. There was already a demand for him this poet of liberty and equality. **For certainly before America discovered Robert Burns, Robert Burns had discovered America.**

This ploughman poet well knew of the **tide of freedom that surged through Europe and North America in the latter half of the 18th century washing away the chains of oppression.** We know in his 17th year, the year 1776 that he knew much of the American War and would have read the declaration of independence which was widely circulated in newspapers of the day. In his **BALLAD OF THE AMERICAN WAR** he writes in detail about the numerous campaigns from The Great Lakes, Quebec , Saratoga, The Boston Tea Party and to the Surrender at Yorktown

Even though he wrote that poem a few years after the war and did not publish it in his first editions for obvious reasons, he did become the first major poet to respond to America with support and excitement.

Robert Crawford in his biography THE BARD makes a strong case based on Burns' poems THE BALLAD OF THE AMERICAN WAR and ODE TO GENERAL WASHINGTONS BIRTHDAY That he is America's poet for he made himself so in his poetry.

It should come as no great surprise that Burns was greatly admired by American politicians and writers. **Both Washington and Thomas Jefferson** had copies of Burns works in their libraries and can be seen to have shared some of his ideals.

In his ODE TO GENERAL WASHINGTONS BIRTHDAY he writes almost treasonously for his love of liberty

See gathering thousands, while I sing

A broken chain exulting bring

And dash it in a tyrants 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 dangers hour still flaming in the van

You know, and dare maintain, the Royalty of Man.

This is a man- a poet who loved America and the ideals it stood for and America embraced him for it. Politicians and writers would praise his name for years to come.

Abraham Lincoln we know felt strongly about Burns works having been introduced to them at an early age. It is well documented by his clerks how he would sit for hours holding guests in his office entertained as he recited **Tam O Shanter** or **Holly Willie** or any of the other numerous poems he had memorized and all in a good Scottish accent. Some have even tried to make the case that Lincoln's reading of Burns' a **Mans a Man** influenced his own **Proclamation of Emancipation** that ended slavery in America.

And talking of such- **Frederick Douglas** the American social reformer, orator, writer, statesman and escaped slave, the leader of the Abolitionist movement stated that the first book he bought on gaining freedom was a copy of Burns works. In 1849 addressing a large group in NYC at a Burns dinner he rose to speak and said **“Though I am no Scotchman and have colored skin I am proud to be among you this evening”**, then pointing to a portrait of Burns **“If any of you think me out of place at this occasion, I beg you lay the blame at the door of him who taught me that A MANS A MAN FOR A THAT.”**

A few years earlier Douglas had visited Burns birthplace in Scotland where he met Burns sister and **where Burns niece told him that she felt her uncle was held in higher regard and more greatly admired in America than even in Scotland.**

Another who made that pilgrimage to Alloway and the birthplace was none other than

Lincoln's adversary during the civil war, **Jefferson Davis** the leader of the Confederate States. When he arrived he was met by the two lady custodians who were Burns great nieces and when led into the room where Burns was born Davis was amazed to find on the wall next to a portrait of Robert Burns was a picture of himself. Turning to the smiling women they said **“We read in the papers where Mr. Jefferson Davis was in Scotland and we knew that he would be coming to pay his respects to RB so we prepared a wee surprise.”**

But of course it was not just the politicians and leaders, but the writers, the poets, and the newspaper publishers who continued to sing his praise. Many of the most celebrated poets of the latter part of the 19th century, including **Edgar Allen Poe, Longfellow, Whittier, Walt Whitman, to name but a few**, drew strength and inspiration from Burns works and celebrated him. **Ralph Waldo Emerson** said

The Confession of Augsburg, the Declaration of Independence, the French Rights of Man, The Marseilles. Are no more weighty documents in the history of freedom, than are the songs of ROBERT BURNS.

Walt Whitman wrote so much on Burns that personally I think he had a man crush on him, to quote:

“Probably no man who ever lived was so fondly loved by both men and women as was Robert Burns”. Or “No Poet recorded, so fully bequeaths his own personal magnetism”

In Canada it was a somewhat different market for Burns, a country settled with far more Scots than with its neighbor to the south, just as enamored but with a much stronger connection to home.

In Elizabeth Watterson’s book RAPT IN PLAID; Canadian literature and Scottish Tradition, she states. In Canada in the early 19th century there was hardly a household that did not treasure a copy of Burns’ poems”.

Canada like the United States gave us numerous poets who filled books with tributes to Burns, some forgettable, perhaps most, but others more poignant and touching. W.M MacKeracher the Canadian Poet wrote in **To a copy of Burns Poems found in the house of an Ontario Farmer**

Large book with heavy covers worn and old

Bearing clear proof of usage and of years

Thine edges yellow with their faded gold,

Thy leaves with fingers stained- perchance with tears

With reverent hands I lay aside the tome,

And to my longing heart content returns

For in the stranger’s house I am at home

For thou dost make us brothers, Robert Burns.

Thy Leaves with fingers stained- perchance by tears

That line shows us the reverence in which Robert Burns was held by these early Canadians.

That great collector and collator of all things Bunsian published this essay by John Dow in 1897 from which I quote:

“When the ubiquitous Scot leaves his native country his patriotism grows, if anything, stronger and more sensitive, amid strange scenes, strange faces, and alien tongues. Memories of the old country grow warm in his heart and the old familiar accent becomes

very dear to him. Then it is that Burns poetry and his songs offer a rallying ground of affectionate reminiscences, and emotions that arise from instincts of the blood.”

Maybe not so very much different from today.

In America after that first printing in 1788 there continued a stream of published editions of the works. In nearly all cases they were pirated from editions published in Great Britain. There was no copyright law, well there was, but America paid it no attention. In Canada a British colony most all of the copies of Burns to be found across the country from the Maritimes to the Rockies came from Britain and to a lesser amount from the US. **Fiona Black In Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture writes in great detail about how Burns Works spread across Canada through a network of wholesalers and booksellers from Britian to the Prairies, but also notes of a fascinating notice placed in the Quebec Gazette of June 1789 for a proposed printing by subscription of the Celebrated Ploughman Poet Robert Burns. But alas there is no proof that every such an early work appeared.**

My own theory is that as so many of the Scots who came to Canada would have had their own copy and would not generate a demand for something new, Nothing wrong with what they had, Burns was dead and hadn't written anything new so what they had was just fine, **Treasured mind you, and old and worn .**

BUT what of those finger stained leaves- Long before they gathered dust on some shelf they were lovingly handled and read. Not only an immigrants link with a country he would never see again, but also read by a newcomer in a new world perhaps with no Scottish blood. **But yet he could take solace and find strength in the writings of a man of genius who helped us to understand and lay claim to the dignity of man. That none is entitled by wealth or accident of birth to hold right over another.**

He could find the humor in the world's greatest Satire **Holly Willie's Prayer**

Humor at the expense of a man so blinded by his own self righteousness that we still laugh at him today. A man who lived and still lives thanks only to Robert Burns.

He can be one with **Tam O Shanter** as he rides home again through Daub and Mire to that Sulky Sullen Dame, still nursing her wrath. He still rides every time we open that book, turn that page.

Finger stained leaves pages that were turned and words read and messages found in so many of Burns great verse epistles

Ah Davie-

If happiness hae not her seat- and center in the breast

We may be wise or great- but never can be blest.

Nae treasures nor pleasures- could mak us happy lang
The hearts aye the part aye- that maks us right or wrang
Or to young Andrew-
To catch dame fortunes golden smile,-assiduous wait upon her;
And gather gear by every wile -that's justified by honor;
Not for to hide it in a hedge -Nor for a train attendant;
But for that glorious privilege – of being independent

And what of those TEAR STAINED PAGES? Only Burns could take an old song already worked over by others and bring it to something beautiful and loving and timeless.

John Anderson my Jo, John- we clamb the hill thgither
And monie a cantie day John-weve had wi ane anither
Now we maun totter doon john- and hand in hand well go
And sleep thegither at the foot- John Anderson my Jo

And so many other verses that still resonate with us, not only a link with Scotland but giving us messages of hope, unequalled sentiments of love, the joys of friendship, the rightful scorn of hypocrisy.

That is why these books with their finger and tear stained pages abound. Robert Burns was read over and over again, and his message is still there for us today as fresh and meaningful as it was two hundred years ago. Read them, share them, be not selfish with them. Keep his memory not only Immortal but alive and vital.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please be upstanding.