

A TRIBUTE TO DR. JIM CONNOR

When the body of Dr. Jim Connor was piped from London's First St. Andrew's Church on February 28, 2004, after one of those rare funerals in which everything was in sync the music, prayers, eulogies and the kilted minister's remarks – the city of London lost one of its best-loved physicians. Until his death Jim was seeing patients at his Central Avenue Clinic. He practiced medicine for 60 years, 10 months, and 8 days and he still made house calls. But if family and friends mourned a personal loss, and the city of London lost a physician, the worldwide community of "Burnsians" – those scholars and devotees of the work of Scotland's bard, Robert Burns – lost a giant. Jim Connor was born in Motherwell, Scotland on July 2, 1918. He attended Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities, and graduated in medicine in 1943. He served as a physician in the Royal Army Medical Corps from 1943 to 1945. After the war Jim practiced in Glasgow where he became known as the "stage doctor", on call for actors and performers in the theatre district. During this period Jim forged friendships with many entertainers, contacts that would prove invaluable in later years. In the early 1960s, Jim and his family emigrated to London, Ontario; here Jim's enthusiasm for Robert Burns reached full flourish; first, with the London Burns Club (where he was President 1974- 84); later with the Bi-Centenary Discussion Group, which he founded in 1996 to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Burns' death. Jim Connor was the only Burnsian I know so dedicated as to arrange that our monthly meetings would be held in a condominium reserved for that purpose; the directory listed "Robert Burns" as the sole occupant.

Jim's first Burns Club coup occurred in 1976 when he staged "An Evening with Kenneth McKellar" before a sold-out audience at Western's Alumni Hall. I ran into Jim at the intermission; he was wandering about the back of the hall and fairly bursting his buttons with delight: "Can you believe this?" he asked, and the truth was that I couldn't. Jim followed this up with other concert tours by McKellar, Andy Stewart, the Alexander Brothers and others, but everyone who was there acknowledged that first McKellar night as pure magic. Scotland's greatest tenor sang three encores before intermission, and at the end had to plead with the audience to let him leave the stage. Afterwards, McKellar came back to Jim's house for a drink, and even sang again to a few gathered around Jim's piano. Robert Burns said the poet Robert Ferguson (1750-74) was "my elder brother in the muse"; Jim Connor was mine. Much of what I know of Robert Burns I learned from him. An indefatigable organizer, Jim pulled off the near impossible feat of persuading the Robert Burns Federation to hold its annual meeting outside the U.K.; this had not happened in the Federation's century-plus history but, in 1979, the conference was held at Western University in London. In 1980 Jim founded the North American Association of Federated Burnsians (NAFBI); he served as President from 1982 to 1984. Of all his Burnsian achievements, Jim was perhaps most proud of his term as President of the Robert Burns World Federation in 1987; never before had someone living outside the U.K. worn that chain of office. As someone remarked at the time, Jim must have invented the concept of air miles, so many did he log in his trans-Atlantic flights between Canada and Scotland. In 2001 Jim was declared Worldwide Ambassador for the Robert Burns World Federation. Jim was an honorary member of Burns Clubs all over North America. He organised his last Burns supper on January 17, 2004, in London. His enthusiasm was undiminished. I proposed the "Toast to the Lasses", and Jim's gracious wife, Elma, responded. At a reception in 1999 to honour his 80th birthday, Jim told me he would make sure that I got an invitation to his 90th; "stay healthy", he said, "you don't want to miss it". After the reception, he set off for a balloon ride over London. Of his closest friend Gavin Hamilton (whose 6th generation grandson is a member of our Burns

Discussion Group) Robert Burns said something what I wish to say of my mentor and friend, Jim Connor;

“With such as he, wher’er he be, May I be saved or damned.” Ian Hunter

Ian Hunter is Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Law at the University of Western Ontario in London.

(Courtesy of The Robert Burns World Federation 2004)