

Sermon in Celebration of the 251<sup>st</sup> Birthday of the poet Robbie Burns  
(which would be Monday 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2010)  
To be delivered at the Unitarian Church of Calgary,  
January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
the Reverend Fran Dearman

His person was strong and robust; his manners rustic, not clownish; a sort of dignified plainness and simplicity, which received part of its effect, perhaps, from one's knowledge of his extraordinary talents. His features are represented in Mr Nasmyth's picture, but to me it conveys the idea that they are diminished as if seen in perspective. I think his countenance was more massive than it looks in any of the portraits. I would have taken the poet, had I not known what he was, for a very sagacious country farmer of the old Scotch school – i.e., none of your modern agriculturists, who keep labourers for their drudgery, but the *douce gude* man who held his own plough. There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments; the eye alone, I think, indicated, the poetical character and temperament. It was large, and of a dark cast, which glowed (I say literally *glowed*) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men in my time. His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence, without the slightest presumption. Among the men who were the most learned of their time and country, he expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least intrusive forwardness; and when he differed in opinion, he did not hesitate to express it firmly, yet at the same time with modesty. I do not remember any part of his conversation distinctly enough to be quoted, nor did I ever see him again, except in the street, where he did not recognise me, as I could not expect he should. He was much caressed in Edinburgh, but (considering what literary emoluments have been since his day) the efforts for his relief were extremely trifling. I remember on this occasion I mention, I thought Burns' acquaintance with English poetry was rather limited, and also, that having twenty times the abilities of Allan Ramsay and of [Robert] Ferguson, he talked of them with too much humility as his models; there was doubtless national predilection in his estimate...His dress corresponded with his manner. He was like a farmer dressed in his best to dine with the Laird; I never saw a man in company with his superiors in stations and information, more perfectly free from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment. [words of author Walter Scott, from Bruce Lockhart's "Life of Burns", pp.112-15, cited at p. 411 fn. 96 in Buchan.]

Thus the novelist Sir Walter Scott recalled meeting the poet Robert Burns, when Scott was 15 years old, and Burns was introduced to Edinburgh Society.

From Burns' own letters we hear that the poet felt not so much at ease as he might appear. But there he was, the national poet of Scotland—the Bard. And tomorrow will be the Bard's 251<sup>st</sup> Birthday! Many a haggis will be addressed as “noble chieftain of the pudding race” this week.

Let us consider the time and place into which Robbie Burns was born, the values reflected in his work, and how he might “the giftie gie us, to see ourselves as others see us”.

Burns was born in Ayrshire in south west Scotland, as Scotland emerged fully from the middle ages. Roughly 1600, James the Sixth of Scotland became James the First of England, and moved south to London. Roughly 1700, in response to an economic meltdown that makes our present crisis look like a walk in the park, Scotland escaped national bankruptcy through Union with England. The Scottish Parliament followed the King to London, and the Church of Scotland took on a magisterial role. The Act of Union opened English markets and jobs throughout the British Empire to ambitious Scots.

Complicating matters, a series of Jacobite rebellions in the north of Scotland culminated in the tragic upheavals of the rebellion of 1745. One consequence of Bonnie Prince Charlie's doomed adventure was that the feudal powers of the highland lairds were broken forever.

Modernity came to Scotland with the '45, and Edinburgh became “the Athens of the North”. The Scottish Enlightenment was on! Reason and intelligent experiment crowded the city. Hospitals, university buildings, bridges, and new towns re-shaped the crowded old city. There was infrastructure where once were fields and crowded tenements. Instead of ten days to London, a coach could reach there within five days, three if you were galloping post-haste on the trail of a bank embezzler.

Science flourished. Remember the hat on which the regrettable insect is perambulating in Burns' poem “To a Louse: On Seeing One upon a Lady's Bonnet at Church”? —“but Miss's fine Lunardi! fie!” The Lunardi is a hat named for an Italian scientist who had made several flights over Edinburgh with a helium balloon.

As I said, Science flourished. Adam Smith wrote “The Wealth of Nations”. Doctors built up perhaps the finest medical university in all Europe. (And shifty-eyed ‘resurrectionists’ pillaged graveyards to keep the anatomy classes supplied with fresh cadavers.)

The philosopher David Hume did some deep thinking about how we think, which led to the hypothetical process we now call the scientific method. Hume's suggestion that we can only know what we know through our senses, which are unreliable, provoked a philosophical backlash known as the School of Common Sense, which argued that we can know enough to get on with what we need to be doing, day by day. The School of Scottish Common Sense saw no difficulty in honouring both science and religion, together; Common Sense philosophy was profoundly pragmatic, egalitarian, and democratic.

The School of Common Sense held certain truths to be self-evident.....

The Scottish Enlightenment profited from the relatively high rate of literacy which prevailed in Scotland. You see, John Calvin and John Knox, who shaped the church of Scotland, had placed scripture front and centre. Accordingly, the Kirk, since about 1600, had sought to establish schools in every parish. If your religion is based on revelation through scripture, you need to be able to read. Scots could read.

Calvin offered another gift; the right to private judgement—within limits.

Calvin spoke of the sovereignty of God. The Kirk seemed at times to confuse God's sovereignty with their own.

In 1697, in Edinburgh, a medical student named Thomas Aikenhead, orphaned son of an apothecary, had the unfortunate distinction of being the last man in Britain to be executed for Blasphemy. His words would have been let pass in the liberal south. His recantation would have satisfied the Catholic Inquisition. The Church of Scotland hanged him. Poor Thomas was scarcely twenty. It was a scandal. And the elders of the Kirk discovered, once again, that to stop a voice is not to stop an idea.

Within mere decades, the ideas for which Thomas Aikenhead was hanged were openly discussed in the classrooms of Edinburgh University. (Some of you may be familiar with the Goldstone book, "Out of the Flames". You may have read there how the third copy of the extremely rare first edition of Michael Servetus' *Christianismi Restitutio* was deposited in the library at Edinburgh University about the same time that poor Thomas was executed.)

Not quite sixty years later, the reactionary elements within the Kirk once again attempted to stifle dissent and liberalism. In 1756 charges of heresy and atheism were brought against philosopher David Hume, the Einstein of his age. The charges were brought before church courts. Hanging was no longer an option. It was demanded that Hume be shunned and excommunicated.

Hume was defended before the spiritual courts by the fiery Alexander Wedderburn, who later moved south, polished up his English, and became Lord Chancellor of England. James Buchan, author of "Crowded with Genius", an excellent account of the Scottish Enlightenment, describes the proceedings thus.

"Attending as an Elder of Dunfermline, Wedderburn sprang up to demand that Hume's name be dropped from the overture. His maiden speech gave a taste of the insolence, ruthlessness and sarcasm he later brought to the Woolsack.

He demanded to know whether every man now preparing to 'crush Mr Hume with the censures of the Church' had read the writings to be condemned?

Am I to believe that the holy presbyters, trusted with the care of souls of which they are to give an account, instead of preaching, praying, and catechising,

have been giving up their days and nights to Mr Hume's 'Treatise on the Human Understanding', and to his 'Essay on Miracles', and to 'Cause and Effect'—writings said to be so poisonous and so pernicious—in neglect of the spiritual good of others, and possibly to the peril of their own principles...Can you all tell us the difference between coincidence and causation?

And what was the point of condemnation?

The opinions complained of, however erroneous, are of an abstract and metaphysical nature—not exciting the attention of the multitude—not influencing life or conduct...

Suppose the General Assembly were to pass the sentence of the Greater excommunication, by which Mr Hume would be 'excluded from the society of all Christians and handed over to the evil one'.

..this is a sentence which the civil power now refuses to recognize, and which will be attended with no temporal consequences. You may wish for the good of his soul to burn him as Calvin did Servetus, but you must be aware that, however desirable such a power may appear to the Church, you cannot touch a hair of his head, or even compel him against his will to do penance on the stool of repentance.

Your 'libel', as we lawyers call it, is *ex facie*, inept, irrelevant, and null, for it begins by alleging that the defender denies and disbelieves Christianity, and then it seeks to proceed against him and to punish him as a Christian...

Wedderburn moved that the Assembly drop 'the overture anent Mr. David Hume, because it would not...minister to edification'.

Robert Wallace, in a pamphlet which like so much of his writings never saw publication, made those points less heatedly and added to them: why go after 'calm contemplative wrongheaded writers' and not the 'Drunkards, revellers, whore-mongers, adulterers' et cetera that made up so much of Scots society. [Buchan 101-102, citing at p367 fn 48 Robert Wallace, 'necessity or expediency of the Churches inquiring into the Writings of David Hume Esq.']

Thus Buchan closes out the story of Hume's prosecution by the more severe element of the Church of Scotland. This is what people did before television. The Canadian Unitarian Council

will be gathering at Victoria in mid May for their annual conference; it doubt their proceedings will be as lively.

Hume's attackers were voted down, fifty to seventeen, with many abstentions and many who deliberately absented themselves from the proceedings.

Sixty years after Thomas Aikenhead's execution for Blasphemy, the church courts could no longer restrict free-thinking. David Hume lived out his life in sociable comfort, surrounded by friends, and died in his own bed, a serene and happy atheist, after a lifetime of study and fellowship in the Athens of the North.

There is a profound irony in this.

The Church of Scotland, having lifted up literacy, private judgement, and the sovereignty of God for six generations since John Knox, had helped create a nation of literate persons, much given to the study of the creation over which God, and not the Kirk, was Sovereign, and intent to exercise their right to private judgement. John Knox and the Kirk had struggled long and hard to resist bishops and episcopal oversight, to insist on the election of ministers and church officials, and to establish a ground-up democratic polity. They had built a democratic church, and so it was.

And so the Scotland into which the poet Burns was born in 1759 would encourage him to read and encourage him to think. The Kirk would admonish irregular behaviour, but it could not stop his voice. And that voice comes to us still as a mirror of passion, condemning hypocrisy and self-righteousness, and speaking out for love, liberty, justice, compassion, and the brotherhood of man: 'A man's a man for a' that.' (Burns was also a Freemason.)

The poet Burns, as a good Scot, however rustic, was literate and well read. Largely home schooled, he knew his bible, some French, some Latin, and many challenging authors. As he looked for his own voice, he came across some work by an earlier Scots poet, name of Robert Fergusson.

Fergusson had chosen to write in a troubadour ballad form of old Scotland. And he had chosen to write in a vigorous Scots-English dialect, essentially English embedded with some Scots words.

Now, by this time Gaelic was known and used only in the north. And the professions—the church, the law, and the universities—spoke southern English, more or less. (When they went south, Scots professionals often engaged a language coach to polish their English.) Robert Burns followed the example of the poet Robert Fergusson, shaped his verse in the old Scottish metres, and embedded Scots words into the English syntax.

Also, Robert Burns came into his poetic voice at a time when the age of reason and enlightenment was being stretched by a new Romanticism.

Burns was influenced by the Scots writer Henry Mackenzie: hard nosed tax lawyer by day, romantic novelist by night. Mackenzie wrote a novel called "The Man of Feeling", that made room for 'sensibility' and emotion in Scottish literature.

When Robbie Burns published his first book of poetry at Kilmarnock in 1786, it was Henry Mackenzie, literary critic, who wrote the review that established Burns' reputation. Burns spoke to national culture and pride. Burns spoke to feeling and passion. Burns spoke in a Scots dialect, in a Scots literary form. Henry Mackenzie loved it, and told the world. Mackenzie recognized Burns as a home-grown genius. Burns was the toast of Edinburgh for two whole seasons.

Burns followed his poems with songs, and travelled across Scotland, seeking out old songs, rescuing bawdy ballads from obscurity with slightly more respectable words, and writing new songs of his own. Burns gift was for lyric, and much of his work has an enduring appeal.

Burns was twenty-seven when his genius was recognized. He had only ten more years to live.

Burns had been set to the plough at the age of thirteen, and he prided himself on that skill, but the killing hard work of agricultural labour, along with the lingering effects of rheumatic fever in childhood, had compromised his health. Burns' father had worked himself to death on a hard-scrabble farm, and Burns was well on the way to doing the same. Thanks to well placed friends, Burns eventually got a job with the Excise, which eased the load a little. And thanks to generous patrons, Burns was also able to travel through Scotland collecting songs.

Let's look a little at some of the values Burns folded into his poetry. Part of the national heritage that Burns explored was the image of a hardy, industrious, independent, virtuous peasantry. Thus the image of "The Cotter's Saturday Night"—the tender family gathering, the loving father, the simple piety of a family gathered round to hear their patriarch read the scriptures. By all accounts Burns revered, loved, and admired his father, and the tender portrait reflects Burns' own upbringing.

Burns' father had a liberal turn of mind in religion and had written his own catechism with which to teach his children. Burns apparently lavished a similar tender affection and care on his own children. But despite the charm of the poem, the rural image Burns projected in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" was already on the wane. The industrial revolution had arrived in England and was working its way north. The hungry mills cried out for wool, and the fields were transformed by the agricultural revolution. Exotic new methods and strange new crops, like turnips, were introduced. (Turnips, apparently, were first served as a dessert, not just as a vegetable.) Larger farms, worked with machinery and labourers, were taking over the land from tenant farmers. In the Highlands, the crofters were being cleared off their pitiful small acreages; sheep were more profitable than people. The rural community Burns described was soon to be a nostalgic memory.

And what of the people?

Burns is often accused of drunkenness and lechery. By the standards of the day, he was probably no worse than most, and better than many.

Burns' poems include many drinking songs, but the point is good fellowship and conviviality; drinking together (among male gatherings) was part of the pattern of socializing of the times. My sense is that Burns was too poor to be a serious drunk. And worked too hard.

Burns also wrote many love songs, and pursued many women, and fathered many children, some illegitimate, some legitimate with his beloved wife, Jean Armour. Extramarital affairs were also not unusual for the time. I suspect that what might have been unusual was Burns' open expressions of pride and joy in all his children, and his care for them. Burns wrote a poem for one of his illegitimate children: "Welcome my bonnie, sweet wee dochter!/ Tho' ye came here a wee unsought for...../I'll never rue my trouble wi' thee/ But be a loving father to thee....."[Wilkie pp100-101]

To my mind, the test of a father is do you know who and where your children are? And that they are warm and dry, well fed, well cared for, and well educated?

Consider the story of Anne Park, the niece of an innkeeper. Anne bore Burns' child, and died soon after. The child lived. Burns added a postscript to his poem, "The Gowden Locks of Anna":

The kirk and state may join and tell,  
To do sic things I manna;  
The kirk and state can go to hell,  
And I shall gae to Anna.  
She is the sunshine o' my e'e,  
To live but her I canna;  
Had I on earth but wishes three,  
The first should be my Anna.  
[Wilkie pp 70-71/

Burns scooped up the motherless infant and took her home to his wife, who raised the babe as one of her own. Jean Armour must have been a very special woman.

O' a' the airts the wind can blaw  
I dearly love the west,  
For there the bonnie lassie lives,  
The lassie I lo'e best;  
There wild-woods grow, and rivers row [roll]  
And monie a hill between;  
But day and night my fancy's flight  
Is ever wi' my Jean.

I see her in the dewy flowers,  
I see her sweet and fair;

I hear her in the tunefu' birds,  
I hear her charm the air;  
There's not a bonnie flower that springs  
By fountain, shaw or green;  
There's not a bonnie bird that sings,  
But minds me o' my Jean.

The poem is titled, "I Love My Jean". [Wilkie 119]

The relationship between men and women was a significant issue in Burns' time. Enlightenment and liberalism engaged feminist issues. Mary Wollstonecroft Godwin, author of "The Vindication of the Rights of Women", was born the same year as Burns. Burns wrote a poem titled "The Rights of Woman".

While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,  
The fate of empires and the fall of kings;  
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,  
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;  
Amid this mighty fuss, just let me mention,  
The Rights of Woman merit some attention.  
[Wilkie pp 6-7]

These rights being named by Burns as protection, decorum (meaning courteous treatment), and admiration.

Burns wrote another poem condemning forced marriage, entitled "How cruel are the parents". He wrote a poem about a chained fox, in which the fox learns liberty and makes his escape. He wrote a poem for a mouse, apologizing for overturning its domestic arrangements, with winter coming on: "the best-laid schemes of mice and men/ gang aft agley". [Wilkie 3]

Later generations would prize Burns' voice for its liberty, and brotherhood, and his outrage at hypocrisy, injustice, and self-righteousness.

New England Unitarians of a century later wrote poems and addresses in his praise. As well they might. Burns' rejection of Calvinist severity, his enthusiasm for Calvinist right to private judgement, the praise of brotherhood, reverence towards a loving creator God, and awe-struck admiration of the creation, might well resonate with the New Englanders as they too worked through the impending separation between liberal and severe Calvinism.

The great Boston Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing, like Burns before him, would articulate a faith that admired Jesus Christ as Guide and trusted for salvation to a good life. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, like Burns before him, would reverence the divine in nature. Universalists, like Burns before them, would reject the strict Calvinist notion that only an

elect few might gain salvation, and like Burns before them would undertake a larger hope, that God would call all God's children back to God's self.

According to the website of the Unitarian Church of Edinburgh, there was a Unitarian community gathered in Edinburgh while Burns was there, since 1776 in fact. Whether the poet met them, I cannot say. Nor would I name Burns as a Unitarian or a Universalist as such. Rather I would say that Burns tended to a liberal, generous brand of Calvinism, rejecting the notion of original sin, rejoicing in creation, revering the holy, and hoping for an eternal harmony that would be available to all persons.

Burns was apparently acquainted with the Unitarian minister Joseph Priestly and Theophilus Lindsey. Burns did speculate on the holy as one, not three. Burns did shock his neighbours with openly heretical speech. He also took seriously the religious education of his children, as his father had before him.

In Burns own words: "My definition of worth is short: truth and humanity respecting our fellow-creatures; reverence and humility in the presence of ...my Creator." [from a letter to Clarinda, cited at Esslemont 155]

In conclusion, Robbie Burns was born with a gift for lyric genius into an age of reason, modernity, literacy, and sensibility, that gave him room to be fully human. His poetry and songs share that humanity with us, and are his gift to us. Let us be thankful for that gift.

Happy Birthday, poet Burns.

Rev. Fran Dearman, Winnipeg, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009;  
Revised for presentation at Calgary, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

## Bibliography

(The work on Burns is vast, and includes many of his own letters and reflections; these are the volumes employed and cited in this sermon.)

James Buchan, "Crowded with Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh's Moment of the Mind". New York, 2003.

Peter Esslemont, "Brithers A': A minute a day with Burns poet, lover and prophet of brotherhood", 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Aberdeen, 1943.

Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, "Out of the Flames: the Remarkable Story of a Fearless Scholar, a Fatal Heresy, and One of the Rarest books in the World". New York, 2002. [p. 277 ff describes the discovery of a rare extant copy of the original 1553 "Christianismi Restitutio", by Michael Servetus, donated to the library at the University of Edinburgh in 1695, approximately one year before the trial and execution of Thomas Aikenhead for Blasphemy.]

George Scott Wilkie, "Select Works of Robert Burns: Verse, Explanation and Glossary". Glasgow, 1999

There are also numerous useful websites. I found these especially helpful:

The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography  
<<http://www.25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/robertburns.html>>  
<<http://www.25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/thomasaikenhead.html>>

The National Trust for Scotland Education Website and Teachers Resources:  
<<http://www.ntseducation.org.uk/teachers/jacobites.html>>

Also any search begun with Scottish Enlightenment or Common Sense will be fruitful.

FD/fd/