

The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns

Friends, Carloprians and Countrymen, lend me your ears, I do not come to bury Burns but to praise him. Tonight we gather as countless generations have done, to honour not merely a poet, but a voice—one that still speaks with startling clarity across the centuries. We meet under the one safe assumption of a Burns Supper: that Robert Burns would have enjoyed it immensely—though he might have questioned the speeches, criticised the haggis, and certainly stayed longer than planned.

Those on the Hall Committee will know that I have carefully avoided being asked to give the Immortal Memory for the Carlops Burns Supper for 33 years. It won't be lost on you that my abilities with the Scot's tongue could be likened to the English spoken by the French policeman in the sitcom 'Alo Alo'. I certainly cannot promise to match previous speakers such as the late Mary Howie with her memory of Burns and her imitation of various local sheep breeds, nor can I match Murray's magical trip through Burns' collections of music and songs some years ago.

When speaking to a Carlops crowd I wanted to look at local links and understand how our own local hero, Allan Ramsay, influenced Robert Burns, and how their written styles complimented each other and yet were so very different.

Robert Burns lives because we still speak his words, still sing his songs, and still recognise ourselves in his vision. To understand that vision fully, we must remember that Burns did not rise from nothing—he rose from a tradition, and at its heart stands Allan Ramsay. Burns was born in 1759, a year after Ramsay's death, He grew up into a Scotland still finding its feet after the Union of 1707 and still glancing nervously over its shoulder at the failed Jacobite cause. Scotland was poised on the edge of transformation.

The Union was still young, the Enlightenment in full stride, and the old certainties of kirk, laird and crown were beginning—quietly, dangerously—to loosen. The tartan had been banned, the Highlands pacified, and improvement was the order of the day. Fields were enclosed, dialects discouraged, and the Kirk kept a watchful eye on everyone—especially anyone enjoying themselves. Christmas had been banned in 1640 and was not legal to be celebrated in Scotland until 1958, hence our concentrated enjoyment at Hogmanay instead.

In Scotland, by the time Ramsay was coming into his teens the national mind was expanding even as the purse was often empty. The Darien Scheme had just failed and pushed a bankrupted Scotland to be 'bought and sold for English gold'. There is an argument put forward by some that the Scottish Enlightenment was directly due to the Union of 1707. Scotland had suddenly found itself without a parliament or a king. However, the aristocrats of Scotland were still determined to participate in and improve the policies and welfare of their country. It is possible that out of this desire and focus, the Scottish literati were born.

This was also the Scotland shaped by Allan Ramsay who experienced first hand the process of the Union of the Crowns and the Act of Union: processes determined to undermine Scots and their culture. Ramsay performed a small miracle maintaining that culture: persuading polite society that Scots was fit for literature. Burns lived through the latter end of the Enlightenment period, but kept the lights low.

Ramsay, writing half a century before Burns, rescued Scots from polite neglect. His *Gentle Shepherd* gave us pastoral Scotland—idealised, lyrical, urbane—a land of reasoned love and classical form, shaped by Enlightenment poise. Ramsay did this gently. He smiled his way in. He wrote pastorals, sang songs, quoted Horace, and reassured Edinburgh that one could be Scottish and civilised. His shepherds in *The Gentle Shepherd* are sensible creatures who resolve their difficulties with reason, good manners, and the occasional happy coincidence.

Burns was heir to a tradition already shaped by that earlier champion of the Scots tongue. Burns admired this idea of the Scots Pastoral image deeply—he took that inheritance and then promptly ignored the good manners and set it on fire.

Both men wrote with affectionate irony. Ramsay's humour is warm, knowing, and lightly satirical; Burns' humour is sharper, more dangerous, but recognisably of the same bloodline. We can trace a clear line from Ramsay's playful social observation to Burns' blistering mockery of false piety in *Holy Willie's Prayer*. Each understood that laughter could instruct where sermons failed. Robert Burns proved that you don't need a university education to change literature—just a plough, a pen, and a complete disregard for authority.

Like Ramsay, Burns placed rural Scotland at the centre of his work. Where Ramsay's shepherds speak gracefully of love, Burns' farmers sweat, laugh, curse, and desire. Where Ramsay polished the language, Burns trusted it—trusted it enough to let it speak plainly, bawdily, angrily, tenderly. Burns did not write about the people; he wrote as one of them. His pastoral is not a painted Arcadia but the real fields of Ayrshire—muddy boots, hard winters, fleeting joy.

Both poets use rural life as a moral testing ground. In Ramsay, the countryside becomes a place where virtue is rewarded, and corruption gently corrected. In Burns, it is where pride is pricked, hypocrisy exposed, and humanity revealed in all its contradiction. Both men believed the countryside was not a cultural backwater but the moral engine room of the nation. Both used Scots not as nostalgia, but as precision engineering: the right tool for the job. And both understood that song, humour, and story were more persuasive than philosophy delivered at volume.

But if Ramsay's Scotland is a well-tended garden, Burns' is a field after a storm.

Burns was no rustic innocent. He read widely, thought deeply, and lived intensely. Burns didn't drink because he was a poet; he was a poet because he drank and remembered to write it down. He absorbed Enlightenment ideas of equality and human dignity, yet never lost sight of Scotland's older, darker imagination. For while Burns could toast the brotherhood of man, he also knew that Scotland still danced with shadows. The witchcraft act was repealed in 1736 only 21 years before Burns was born and eleven years after Ramsay wrote his *'Gentle Shepherd'*.

In *Tam o' Shanter*, we see Burns at his most mischievous and profound. This is no mere folktale; it is a collision of eras. The rational world of improvement and progress meets the ancient supernatural—witches, warlocks, and the Devil himself, piping them on. Burns knew that Enlightenment Scotland had not banished superstition; it had merely driven it indoors, into story, song, and memory.

Even in their engagement with Scotland's older superstitions—the witches, spirits, and moral folklore—there is kinship. Ramsay's world still acknowledges a moral universe shaped by tradition and tale. Burns, while living in a more rational age, refuses to discard that inheritance. In *Tam o' Shanter*, the witches who whirl through Alloway Kirk are heirs to the same imaginative Scotland Ramsay knew a land where reason and the supernatural coexist uneasily, but fruitfully.

In allowing witches to whirl across Alloway Kirk, Burns reminds us that reason alone does not satisfy the human soul—we need mystery, terror, and laughter too. Burns respected the Kirk—he just preferred it when it wasn't watching. Burns belongs to the plough and the parlour, the kirk and the tavern, the rational age and the haunted night. He is both pastoral poet and moral rebel, folk singer and philosopher, laughing at witches even as he lets them dance.

Burns lived through the full force of agricultural "improvement"—that polite word for making things more efficient and people more disposable. The development of Carlops was an early example of this movement, pre-ceding the building of New Lanark. Tenant farmers were squeezed, rents rose, and the dignity of labour was often praised by those who had never tried it. Burns knew this world not as an observer but as a participant, and his poetry gives 'the improvement' the respect it deserves: cautious interest, followed by deep suspicion.

Historically, Burns stood with one foot in the Scottish Enlightenment and the other firmly in the alehouse. He admired reason, equality, and learning—but he never trusted those who thought themselves improved beyond human weakness. Ramsay, likewise, balanced classical restraint with folk vitality. Both poets believed in progress, but neither believed it should come without laughter, memory, or mercy.

Allan Ramsay helped Scotland remember its voice. Burns ensured that voice would never again be ignored.

Their shared wit is essential. Ramsay teases human folly with raised eyebrows; Burns does it with a raised glass. Yet both use humour as a moral instrument. Burns' satire of the Kirk—most famously in *Holy Willie's Prayer*—owes much to Ramsay's earlier willingness to laugh at authority without denying the need for order. Both men knew that reverence without humour becomes tyranny.

In an age when Scotland was prosecuting witches less often but fearing them no less, both poets understood their symbolic power. Ramsay's world still accepts the moral universe of folklore; Burns gleefully animates it. In *Tam o' Shanter*, witches dance naked through Alloway Kirk, the Devil plays the bagpipes, and the lesson—like all good Scottish lessons—is learned the hard way. It is Enlightenment Scotland's worst nightmare, so well illustrated in the painting of Carlops that used to hang in the Allan Ramsay Hotel: irrational, pagan, laughing, and having a magnificent time. Each understood that laughter could instruct where sermons failed.

Crucially, both poets stood at the intersection of folk culture and Enlightenment thought. Ramsay was deeply engaged with classical forms and Enlightenment ideals of balance, reason, and improvement. Burns inherited these ideals but democratized them. Where Ramsay gently elevates the rural voice to polite society, Burns insists that polite society listen—or be judged.

Historically, Burns also lived under the long shadow of revolution. The American colonies had rebelled; France would soon follow. Ideas of liberty, fraternity, and equality were in the air—and in Burns' case, on the page. He had the good sense to express them in song rather than pamphlet, which is why we sing A Man's A Man for A' That instead of reading his trial transcript.

Reading this poem today we see why Burns is immortal in his references to humankind. He could have been referring to today's American President when he wrote:

Ye see yon birkie ca'd a lord,

Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that,

Tho' hundreds worship at his word,

He's but a coof for a' that. (He's nothing at all to be concerned about)

For a' that, an' a' that,

His ribband, star, an' a' that,

The man o' independent mind,

He looks an' laughs at a' that.

Burns wrote A Man's A Man for A' That as a concise, political lyric asserting human equality and the dignity of ordinary people. It rejects rank, titles, and material display as measures of worth and insists that moral sense and true worth matter more. The poem moves from the speaker's poverty to a critique of aristocratic pomp and then to a hopeful, universal vision of solidarity. Its recurring refrain, for a' that, underscores Burns's democratic sympathies and his sympathy for the working class. This is why no one's allowed to sit at the top table at a Burns Supper feeling superior.

Yet for all this radicalism, Burns shares with Ramsay a profound love of continuity. Both men understood that a nation is held together not by laws alone, but by shared memory—by songs sung together, stories retold, and jokes understood without explanation. Their shared use of song is another vital link. Ramsay collected, edited, and revitalised Scots songs, preserving melodies and idioms that might otherwise have vanished. Burns continued this work with even greater urgency, treating song as communal property rather than personal ornament. Like Ramsay, Burns understood that Scotland's cultural memory lived not just on the page, but on the tongue and in the gathering. Auld Lang Syne is the natural descendant of Ramsay's song-collecting spirit: communal, unowned, and indestructible.

So Burns did not replace Ramsay; he completed him. What distinguishes Burns, then, is not a rejection of Ramsay, but an intensification. Burns sharpens the language, darkens the humour, deepens the emotional stakes. Where Ramsay reassures, Burns challenges. Yet both are animated by the same conviction: that Scottish life, spoken in Scottish words, deserves dignity, complexity, and joy.

Ramsay opened the door. Burns kicked it wider—then invited everyone in, including the farmers, the drinkers, the sinners, the dreamers, and yes, the witches.

Burns is Scotland's national poet because he managed to offend the Kirk, the gentry, and the excise—while still getting invited back for supper. If Burns were alive today, he'd still be a national treasure—though he'd be asked not to tweet after whisky. This is why Burns remains immortal. Not because he was perfect—he wasn't—but because he was recognisably human in an age determined to tidy humanity away.

So let us be honest with ourselves, as Burns always was. If Robert Burns were to join us tonight, he would approve of the sentiment, applaud the poetry, question the portion size, and politely ignore any suggestion of an early night. He would remind us that virtue is best practiced in company, that equality works best around a table, and that friendship—like whisky—should never be measured too carefully. Burns remains immortal not because he was flawless, but because he was gloriously, recognisably human: fond of love, loyal to laughter, suspicious of authority, and entirely committed to a good chorus.

So when we toast Burns tonight, we do not honour a solitary genius, but the fullest expression of a tradition—pastoral yet political, humorous yet humane, rooted in the land and alive to the world.

So as we raise our glasses, let us do so in the proper spirit—not solemnly, but sociably—and remember that the finest tribute we can offer Scotland's national poet is not just to recite his words, but to live by them... preferably with feeling, good humour, and one more round.

To the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.