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Robert Burns – The Mason

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. Most certainly, Burns's commitment to the ideals of the Enlightenment came from his membership in the Masonic Lodge, much praised and damned for its equality, both in political and religious matters, among its members. But besides these lofty ideals, the Lodge also appealed to Burns for other reasons; the camaraderie and spirit of brotherhood that prevailed in the Lodge Room and the charity towards the widow and orphan. He found in the experience of being a Freemason, something unlike the political and religious institutions that had kept his father in a state of perpetual frustration. For Burns, Freemasonry was one of the cures for his society's numerous social ills.

But before examining Burns's Masonic career, let me first present a very short general history of his life. Born on 25th January 1759, in the parish of Alloway, Ayrshire, Burns was the eldest of seven children to William Burness and Agnes Brown (or Broun). Well educated in a variety of subjects, from Scottish history and folklore to literature, Burns was forced to assist his father in working on the family farm, and took over at 25 when his father died in 1784.

However, physical and financial matters were not the only things that troubled Robert; The Kirk of Scotland and its 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". 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 Bonnie Prince Charlie. This can be seen in poems like "Scots wha Hae", "Charlie is My Darling", "The White Cockade", and many others.

Burns combined his Jacobite sympathies of the past with Jacobin politics of the present. He vocally supported the French and American Revolutions, which aroused suspicion of his loyalties, especially when in the service of His Majesty's government as an excise man, although Burns did recant his French tendencies when Britain and France went to war in 1792. And, while Burns may have been inspired by the French Revolution, his involvement in Freemasonry certainly played a large

part in his opinions in favour of both secular and religious equity.

Freemasonry was very popular in Protestant Europe during Burns's time, especially in the British Isles, where the first Grand Lodge was formed in London on 24th June 1717. Scotland's connections with Freemasonry go even farther back, but to use an old cliché, "that's another story". In England, while Freemasonry tended to be part of the status quo of the gentry, it still tolerated different religious beliefs, even though the government and the state church did not. Jews, Roman Catholics and Dissenter Protestants were all admitted, even though members of these same religious groups could not hold political office under the Test Act, which required all office holders to be members of the Anglican Church. The Reverend James Anderson, a Presbyterian Minister, wrote a new Book of Constitutions for the UGLE in 1721, while he was living in London, and would be excluded from all other aspects of English political and religious life due to his church membership. Yet Anderson's Constitutions are the cornerstone for Masonic bodies the world over. In 1729, the United Grand Lodge of England elected the Duke of Norfolk, a Roman Catholic as the Grand Master - Two clear examples of Freemasonry's ecumenicalism in an age that still knew the bitter sting of religious intolerance and bigotry.

MASONIC HISTORY

Robert Burns was initiated an Entered Apprentice in Lodge St. David, Tarbolton on 4 July 1781, at the age of 23. His initiation fee was 12s 6d, and paid on the same date. Like many other times in his life, Burns came into the Lodge amidst a controversy. Originally, there had been only one Lodge in Tarbolton, chartered in 1771 from the Kilwinning Lodge, which is said to be the oldest Lodge in the world. In 1773, a group broke away from the Lodge, forming Lodge St. David No. 174, and the original Lodge became St. James Tarbolton Kilwinning No. 178, only to be reunited in 1781, 9 days before Burns's first degree. However, while St. James was clearly the older of the two Lodges, St. David's name was used, and the seeds were sown for further dissension. Burns in the meantime was passed to the degree of fellow craft, and raised to the degree of Master Mason on 1st October 1781. The Lodge record book, according to James Mackay's "Burns" reads as follows: "Robert Burns in Lochly was passed and raised, Henry Cowan being Master, James Humphrey Senior Warden, and Alexander Smith Junior Warden. Doc. Robert Wodrow Secretary, James Manson Treasurer and John Tannock Taylor and others of the brethren being present".

Manson and Wodrow would later take the regalia of St. James's Lodge from the charter chest (containing the minute-books, archives and other belongings) stored at John Richard's Inn (Richard was a Steward of Lodge St. David) after tricking Richard into a false errand with a couple of "gills" of punch. While originally ordered to return the regalia and other items by the Grand Lodge, it was eventually ruled that since the union of the 2 Lodges were voluntary, then the separation was as well. The St. James Lodge met again as a separate body on 17 June 1782.

Burns went with Lodge St. James, and on 27 July 1784, he was elected "Depute Master" of the Lodge at the ripe young age of 25. Sir John Witefoord was the Worshipful Master of the Lodge, but it was somewhat of an honorary position, and the Depute Master in reality was in charge. Burns was faithful to the Lodge, attending regularly and 3 minutes were in his handwriting; 29 minutes were

Contributions: If any Brother has suggestions for articles, or questions for which they are seeking answers, please address them to any of the below mentioned and we will endeavour to provide the required information.

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