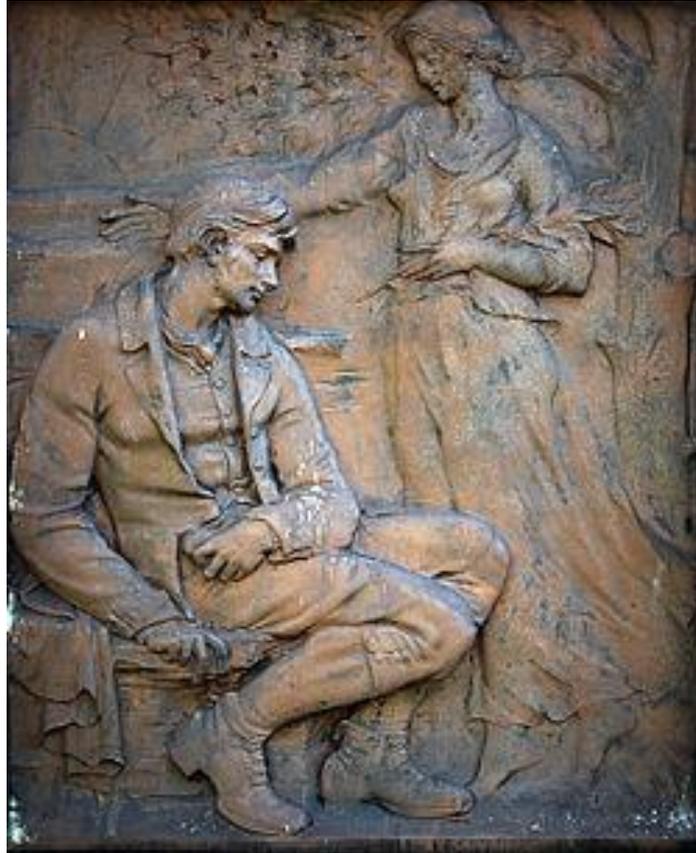


The Immortality of Robert Burns

Based on an Immortal Memory delivery by Alastair McIntosh
to the GalGael Trust, Glasgow, 25 January 2018

Also published online at [Bella Caledonia](#)



Coila with Robert Burns, from *The Vision*

The Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum

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The question that I shall address tonight is this: what is “immortal” in the memory of Robert Burns? And beyond that, how might that speak to our condition today? Let me work through four of his poems.

In *My Luve is Like a Red, Red Rose* the poet pictures a depth of love – “so deep in luve am I” – that will endure till all the seas go dry, till the rocks melt with the sun, and beyond ten thousand miles. If we might draw on poetic licence to leave aside the practicalities, we glimpse here the possibility of a love that exists outside constraints of space and time. Love that is “forever and a day”, in the words of the Mary Hopkins hit of 1968. A love that lifts our lowly imaginations to the soul’s eternal realm. Burns had no time for uptight or hypocritical religion. He showed that in poems like *Holy Willie’s Prayer*. But he understood the God whose name is love, and with it, a sense that behind the physical realm there is the metaphysical; a world that matters and of matters spiritual.

Which brings me to *The Vision*, an epic poem that is missed out from many of the Burns anthologies. It would perhaps offend a certain type of religionist and atheist in equal measure, but it was a great favourite of the late Colin Macleod who, with Gehan here tonight, co-founded the GalGael Trust in 1997. Here, Burns pictures himself huddled round the “ingle-cheek” – the cosy side of the fire – on a cold winter’s night just like the now. He’s lonely, musing on the eddying smoke, thinking back “on wasted time”; when there’s a click at the latch, and there appears an apparition. “Green, slender, leaf-clad holly-boughs/ Were twisted, graceful round her brows;/ I took her for some Scottish Muse,/ By that same token/ .../ Her mantle large, of greenish hue,/ My gazing wonder chiefly drew:/.../ And seem’d, to my astonished view,/ a well-known land.”

Muse she was: for here was Coila of Kyle, part of his native Ayrshire, and she the tutelary goddess of the land. At length, and with much beauty, she tells how she had minded over him since “thy natal hour”. She’d watched his infant life unfold, she’d seen his bosom swell with love, until “I taught thee how to pour in song,/ to sooth thy flame.” Even when “misled by Fancy’s meteor-ray” – his latter-day critics might take note - “... the light that led astray/ Was light from Heaven.” She, and all the spirits of old Scotia’s land, “rouse the patriot up to bare/ Corruption’s heart,” and “teach the bard – a darling care - / The tuneful art.” All this, to “Preserve the dignity of Man,/ With soul erect:/ And trust the Universal Plan/ Will all protect.”

Lonely, then, we might walk our lives. Many of you here in this workshop tonight have walked a lonely life. But never alone. The name of the spiritual game is to know that at some deep level, almost beyond consciousness and comprehension, our lives are held within a greater hand. We’re held inside the basket of a wider, deeper truth than meets the physical eye: and that truth is the fabric of *community*.

If this is valid, what might it mean in our daily lives? In his *Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet*, Burns again begins upon a winter’s night, a night “While winds frae aff Ben-Lomond blaw,/ And bar the doors wi drivin snaw.” Huddling again for warmth “ower the ingle”, he reflects upon his friendship with a fellow-poet, David Sillar (1760-1830), including their love for their respective flames, Meg and Jean.

The climax of the poem comes as if a thunderclap of prayer. “O all ye Pow’rs who rule above!/ O Thou whose very self art love!” He summons up his own “more dear immortal part”, his soul, remembering times of “heart-corroding care and grief”. Burns implores unto his God: “Thou Being. All-seeing./ O, hear my fervent pray’r!” To what end? To kindle tender feelings. To build in him the capacity to feel! “The smile of love, the friendly tear./ The sympathetic glow!” This, to lighten, and brighten, “the tenebrific scene”, the darkness of the world. And that, by simple means of friendship, of togetherness. “To meet with, and greet with/ My Davie, or my Jean!”

The worldview of Robert Burns in each of these poems is that the qualities of eternal love, the immortal verities, find their meaning when expressed “on Earth as is in Heaven”. The

transcendent – what is “above” – becomes clothed or “incarnate” in the immanent – in the ordinary things of everyday life. And that’s what happens here at the GalGael. Look around you. These boats, the things of beauty that we make of wood and stone, fabric and metal; these are the outward faces of a set of inner truths.

These are what bind us in togetherness, as clanship or as kinship. Truths that weave the basket of community in which solitude, is diminished. The very name, *GalGael*, is recognition that, in each of us, there is a little of the stranger “gal” - as found in place names like Galway, Galloway or Innse Gall for the Hebrides with their Norse infusion - as well as anchorage amongst the homeland folk, the “gael”. Medical science is telling us today that many of the ills of society – whether diabetes, or heart disease, or mental illness – are found to correlate with disconnection. That’s why within these walls we call to reconnection. The work of love.

Which brings me, lastly, to the best-known song of Burns. A song on which we’ll end tonight’s proceedings. Its title, *Auld Lang Syne*, means “old long since” or “long ago”. Again and again, Burns trips us up and trips us out from our humdrum dogged fixedness in space and time. His poems show our lives finds meaning only in the round. That roundedness is of a sphere that’s greater than the most of us encompass. So it is we link our arms, and so for old time’s sake we “tak a right guid-willie waught” – a goodwill drink together.

We raise “a cup o kindness yet”, because kindness is the only thing that really matters. (And as an aside, I remember in our primary school at Leurbost on Lewis, we’d been singing *Red, Red Rose*, and I asked the music teacher, “Please Sir, why do we have to sing love songs?” We boys, we’d rather have been singing *Scottish Soldier* or *Campbelton Loch*. “Because,” he said, “love is the most beautiful thing in the world.”)

That is why, in the faith of Robert Burns, we should “love one another,” even, “love your enemies”. It means to give each other space to grow. To try and not back one another into fighting corners. To create a place that is hospitable to the soul, and to beauty, and to endeavour, and to people as we find them as they come here – “for a’ that”.

My friends, I put it to you that Burns’ love was of the red, red rose. His muse flowed from the carrying stream of Scotland’s land. His sense of friendship rested in a Pow’r whose very self is love. And in the end, it grounds itself in simplest joys: “We twa hae paidl’d in the burn/ Frae morning sun till dine./ But seas between us braid hae roar’d/ Sin auld lang syne.”

We are touched by these verities at the GalGael Trust. These gifts of life, of love, transcend mortality. Burns teaches us some meanings of our immortality. And so, friends, I invite you to be upstanding.

I invite you, whether with your filled cup or just cupped hands, to raise a toast: *To Robert Burns. The immortal memory. To Robert Burns.*