

TERRA INCOGNITA

January 25 is a national holiday in Scotland. This article by Helena Fraser, UN Resident Coordinator in Uzbekistan concerns this very event.

A TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY OF ROBERT BURNS



Many of you may be asking, why are we gathered here to commemorate a Scottish poet? Let me tell you a little about him.

Two hundred and twenty-two years ago, in the town of Dumfries in southern Scotland, a rather sickly man in his late thirties died in his humble home, attended by friends and family, leaving his pregnant wife, and numerous legitimate and illegitimate children in dire financial straits, with no legacy but his name, his poems and his songs....

From this man of very unremarkable origins, Robert Burns, sprang a remarkable legacy.

Four days after his death, Burns was buried with full military honors amid a crowd

of thousands of mourners.

And within just six years, the first Robert Burns society was established. Within decades a global Federation of Burns Clubs was created, which now counts over 250 member clubs around the globe, and countless aficionados who gather each 25 January in countless homes, restaurants, and castles around the world.

And so here we are, celebrating the Bard of Scotland in Uzbekistan tonight! (As an aside, may I congratulate the British Ambassador and his team on finding us a genuine Scottish castle here in Tashkent!)

As in death, so in life, Burns was a man of contradictions: Poet, song collector and tax collector, ardent lover, reluctant farmer, feckless husband and doting father.

He was a passionate Scot who felt at home among the English, a man who moved as fluently among the humble folk of his village youth and the urbane elite, just as he did from standard spoken English through Scots dialect to full ‘braid Scots’, (which we will hear more of shortly!)

So why has Burns captured the imagination of so many, for so long? Why is his birthday more widely known and celebrated than, say, that of William Shakespeare, Alexander Pushkin or Anna Akhmatova?



A handwritten signature of Robert Burns in cursive script, written in black ink on a white background.

Burns was an Everyman. At a time of great social and political upheaval, Burns wrote with passion about life, love, religion, politics and freedom. He was championed at home as the epitome of the ‘authentic, free Scot’. Over time, he was championed farther afield as an inspiration to many other freedom-aspiring or marginalized groups, of frankly all political, ethnic or economic stripes: to laissez-faire liberals in 19th century London; to urban middle classes of Boston Mass (where a Burns club was created in 1850); to radicals and communists in mid-twentieth century Moscow and Beijing; and of course to the to the rural working communities in

Scotland from which he came.

If there is a unifying theme to his work, whether the drinking songs, nationalist hymns, the political satires, the bawdy tales or the love poems, it’s his belief in emotional integrity and in freedom to follow your heart. He hated hypocrisy. He hated false pieties and sham morality. He liked whisky. (He loved whisky – several poems are dedicated to it!) He loved the ladies (and there’s a lively debate on whether he loved the ladies more than the whisky, or vice versa). He hated priests and puritans, and they hated him back.

Burns’ instinct was the underdog, the downtrodden and the poor; he was the first person in European literature to take the perspective of the previously invisible – a louse, a worm, a beggar, an impoverished tenant farmer, a fallen woman – and make great poems. Possibly his most famous poem is a musing of regret over several verses for disrupting a mouse’s humble hard-won home with his plough. It includes the famous lines:

The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men / Gang aft agley,
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain, / For promis’d joy!

It was the tangle of these passions and contradictions, underpinned by his love of freedom, that propelled the legend of Burns across the world.

And what of his legacy closer to our (adopted) home here in Tashkent? Burns became a favourite of the literary censors of the early decades of the USSR, who were charged with ensuring access to literature that would chime with and amplify the socialist message.

The Honest man, though e'er sae poor, / Is king o' men for a' that.

Samuil Marshak, a Russian poet and prolific children’s author, was the official translator of Burns into Russian. His translations, which capture the rhythm if not the dialect of Burns’ poetry so beautifully, were sometimes ‘enhanced’ and ‘edited’ to suit the times. To such success, in fact, that the Soviet Union was the first country in the world to honour Burns with a commemorative stamp, marking the 160th anniversary of his death in 1956.

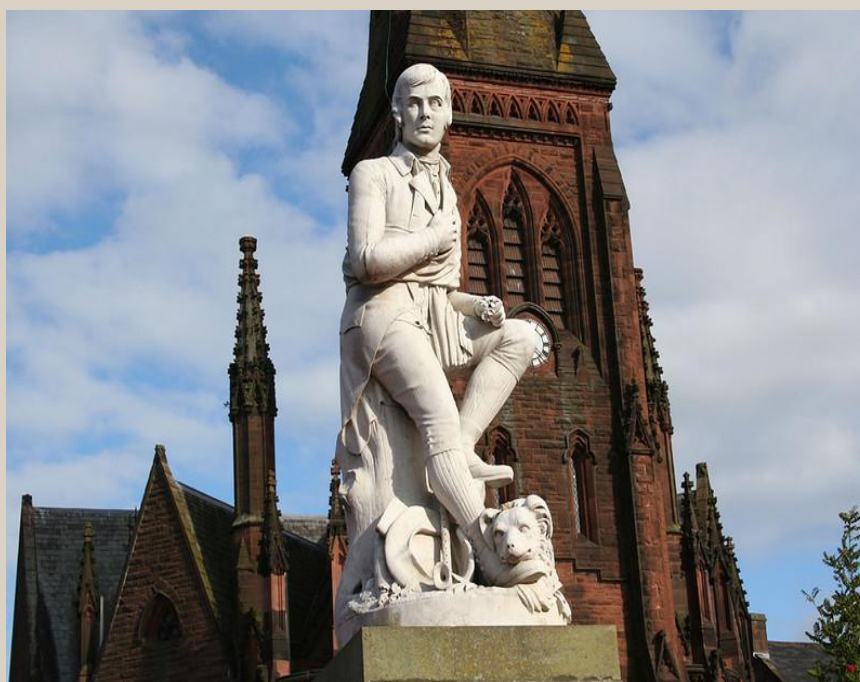
Not all Burns’ poems made it so successfully into translation, however. (And in many countries, his bawdier poems remain untranslated). Burns’ second most famous poem, which you’ll hear shortly, is of course about the haggis: a rare Scottish animal, and if you don’t know any more, don’t ask. But if you can make poetry about haggis, for that matter any Scottish food, and in so doing establish the unquestioned superiority of Scottish cuisine to that of the French, you are a gifted poet indeed!

In closing let me say that the reason why I am so particularly happy to be here to celebrate Burns with you, is a personal one. I grew up singing Burns’ songs, and yearning for Scottish hills, as he does so often in his ballads. To me, Burns’ best poetry is not the diatribe on the priest nor the lauding of the philanderer, although they’re pretty good reads too. But Burns speaks to me most clearly through the centuries in his yearning for better times, his poems of equality and most of all, his emphasis on friendship.

So that is what I would like to celebrate tonight: friendship, дружба, Do’stlik.

The friendships we have with one another. The friendship extended so many of us here today – whether Scots or pseudo-Scots – by the Uzbek community in which we live. The friendship that – as Burns put it – transcends the superficial boundaries of nation, sex, age, state or religion:

That Man to Man the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.



Or as Marshak put it even more clearly (and if you don't speak Russian, you'll hear this in braid Scots later, but everyone knows the tune from around the world in thousand different languages):

За дружбу старую –

До дна!

За счастье прежних дней!

С тобой мы выпьем, старина,

За счастье прежних дней.

And so please be upstanding and join me in a toast, to friendship, to international understanding, and to the Immortal (& International!) Memory of Robert Burns!

By Helena Fraser,

UN Resident Coordinator in Uzbekistan