

ROBERT BURNS NIGHT

January 25th 2009 marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of Scotland's great poet, Robert Burns (1759-1796). It is traditional to salute the poet on his birthday with Burns Night and this year there were 3,000 such events worldwide.



Figure 1. The Marriott chef prepares to present the haggis at the 2009 Burns Night of the Saint Andrew's Society of Washington D.C.

All over the world on New Year's Eve millions of people sing the same song at the stroke of midnight—"Auld Lang Syne"—a poem and song written by Robert Burns. And who doesn't know these stirring lines from the unofficial Scottish national anthem:

*"Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led
Welcome to your gory bed
Or to victorie!"*

Burns is regarded as a pioneer of the Romantic Movement and became a source of inspiration for liberalism and socialism; he also collected Scottish folk songs. Some phrases from his poems are so succinct and meaningful that they have become part of our everyday language. "The best laid schemes of mice and men often go astray" accurately and poignantly describes the way in which your life, my life and the plottings of world governments don't always work out the way they were intended. Burns produced this poem after ploughing a field on his farm and disturbing the nest of a field mouse in November 1785. Millions of other people have done the same thing but Burns stopped and got inside the head of the mouse, lived her life, understood her pain, and felt immense remorse. He was able to produce eight lyrical stanzas that conveyed the entire episode to all humanity forever. To anyone else it might have been just a field mouse but to Burns she was a "*Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie.*" Burns thought the Mousie blessed compared to him and all his troubles.

Burns Night celebrations follow a similar format all over the world so the one I attended on 24 January 2009 will serve to illustrate procedure. This was sponsored by the Saint Andrew's Society of Washington D.C. and was held in the Dulles Airport Marriott Hotel with about two hundred guests. Burns composed in the Scots language, in English and in a light Scots dialect. The best way to hear his poetry is in the original language, recited by someone who knows and loves the work and can deliver it well over an effective public address system to an attentive audience. We did not always succeed at this function but we paid our respects, had a good time, and the poetry will remain long after we have all passed away.



Figure 2. Highland dancer with the Saint Andrew's Society Pipes and Drums.

The men all looked magnificent in their Scots regalia and the ladies, who are used to playing second fiddle at this sort of event, also looked very fine. This was duly noted in the Toast to the Lassies and acknowledged in the Lassies' Reply. The Colors were presented by the Sergeant at Arms and the Saint Andrew's Society Color Guard. We heard national anthems for the United Kingdom and the United States and included a Toast to the

Troops. Salutations from Scotland came from the Second Secretary of Scottish Affairs and then we got to the main business of the evening—the Presentation of the Haggis (Fig. 1). This was the first time the Marriott chef had prepared one so the catering staff hovered with some apprehension and anticipation. The Captain, Corps of Stewards and the Saint Andrew's Society Pipes and Drums paraded through the Salon with the chef holding high the tasty dish. This was set down on the head table in front of Michael Conneen, a community reporter from WJLA Channel 7, who read “Address to a Haggis.” Burns praises, describes and conjures this national dish with such color that its juices fairly fill the room:

*Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o' the puddin-race!*

A three-part appetizer tray circulated our table—Haggis, Neeps (a turnip dish) and Tatties, all delicious, as was the potato leek soup. There was entertainment by the Saint Andrew's Society Highland Dancers (Fig. 2) and the Scottish Country Dance Society of Washington, D.C. (Fig. 3). An after-dinner toast to “The Land We Left” was delivered by the Color Sergeant, who gave a brief and moving portrait of Scottish history, including the Clearances of the Highlands, noting that 150,000 of a total population of 250,000 were forced to migrate.



“The Immortal Memory” was delivered by the Co-Chairman of the Burns Night Committee and included some sketches of Burns—his life, his loves, his illegitimate children and his poems. I met all sorts of interesting people from various Clans, including a small collection of two-star generals from the U.S. Air Force. Only in Washington D.C.!

Figure 3. The Scottish Country Dance Society of Washington D.C. entertains guests at Burns Night 2009.

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