

## Robert Burns

### Who is He?

Robert Burns is one of Scotland's most famous poets and song writers. He is widely regarded as the National Poet of Scotland. He was born in Ayrshire on the 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1759. Burns was from a large family; he had six other brothers and sisters. He was also known as Rabbie Burns or the Ploughman Poet.

### Childhood

Burns was the son of a tenant farmer. As a child, Burns had to work incredibly long hours on the farm to help out. This meant that he didn't spend much time at school. Even though his family were poor, his father made sure that Burns had a good education.

As a young man, Burns enjoyed reading poetry and listening to music. He also enjoyed listening to his mother sing old Scottish songs to him. He soon discovered that he had a talent for writing and wrote his first song, Handsome Nell, at the age of fifteen. Handsome Nell was a love song, inspired by a farm servant named Nellie Kilpatrick.

### Becoming Famous

In 1786, he planned to emigrate to Jamaica to work on a slave plantation. His plans were changed when a collection of his songs and poems were published. The first edition of his poetry was known as the Kilmarnock edition. They were a huge hit and sold out within a month. Burns suddenly became very popular and famous.

That same year, Burns moved to Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland. He was made very welcome by the wealthy and powerful people who lived there. He enjoyed going to parties and living the life of a celebrity.

### The Agate Stone

Burns enjoyed travelling around Scotland with his writing kit, which comprised of goose-quill nibs, a sharpening knife and a tiny inkwell. He would collect old songs and poems, often adapting and enhancing them before adding them to his collection. Whilst on a tour of the Scottish Highlands one day, Burns found a beautiful agate stone pebble (a colourful, patterned gemstone) at Braemar. On his return to Edinburgh, he commissioned a silversmith to make it into a cravat pin. Cravats were like a tie, worn by men at that time. This would have been an expensive thing to do and is an example of how Burns had evolved: from a humble farmer to one of the world's most famous men.

### His Death

In 1788, Burns moved from Edinburgh to Dumfries. Although he was still young, his health was beginning to suffer. This might have been due to the long, hard work he did on the farm as a boy. Robert Burns died on the 21<sup>st</sup> July, 1796. He was only 37 years old. His wife, Jean Armour, was unable to attend her husband's funeral as she was giving birth to Maxwell Burns, their youngest son.

### Remembering Burns

Robert Burns may be gone, but he will never be forgotten. He became even more famous after his death. Statues of Burns can be found in many countries around the world, such as America, Canada and Australia. As expected, Scotland has many monuments dedicated to Burns, such as The Burns Monument Centre in Kilmarnock. The Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway, Ayrshire offers visitors an opportunity to visit the house where Burns was born and it houses the world's most important collection of his life and works.

The 25<sup>th</sup> January (Burns's birthday) is now celebrated as Burns Night. Burns Night Suppers are held by those who appreciate his work. The evening is spent listening to his poetry and songs whilst eating traditional Scottish food like haggis, neeps and tatties. A dram of Scottish whiskey may also be drunk whilst listening to bagpipe music. At more formal suppers, the highlight of the evening is the reading of 'Address to a Haggis'. After guests are seated, the haggis is carried into the room to the sound of a bagpipe and slow hand claps. The haggis is then placed in front of the person nominated to read the poem. At a particular point in the poem, the haggis is cut with great ceremony.

### Famous Songs and Poems

Burns was famous for writing from the heart. His work appealed to all, from the common person to the wealthy. Even though he wrote in a Scottish dialect, his work was loved by people from around the world. He was influenced greatly by the French Revolution which began in 1789, where the people of France rebelled against the monarchy of Louis XVI. He thought that rich and poor people should be treated equally.

Written in 1790, Tam o'Shanter is a firm favourite with fans of Robert Burns; it is also a favourite of Burns himself. The poem is a ghost story set in Scotland. It tells the tale of Tam and his eventful journey home one night, as he and his horse Meg race to the safety of Brig o'Doon (a bridge over the River Doon) in an attempt to escape the witches. Another poem called 'To a Mouse', is also loved by many. It was written after his discovery of the nest of a field mouse – it had been destroyed by his plough. It meant that, despite his hard work and preparation, the poor mouse must suffer the harsh, cold winter without the protection of his nest. The poem is another example of Burns's tolerance and compassion for all living things.

Burns is well remembered for his reworking of an old Scottish song called Auld Lang Syne. The song is about days gone by and the people we have had to say goodbye to. It is traditional to hold hands with the people next to you as you sing. This is to remind us about the importance of friendship. As the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve, Auld Lang Syne is sung to celebrate the end of one year and the start of the next.

## Robert Burns

Who was Robert Burns?

Where did Burns live when he was a boy?

Why do you think he was also called the Ploughman Poet?

Put these main events in the correct order:

- His first collection of poems sold out very quickly.
- He was 37 years old when he died.
- He found an agate stone.
- He wrote his first song at the age of fifteen.
- He spent his childhood on a farm.

Why didn't Burns spend much time at school?

Why do you think he decided not to go to Jamaica?

How do you think his life as a successful adult compared to his childhood.

Why did Burns like to travel around Scotland?

When is Burns Night celebrated? Why that day in particular?

Identify THREE things which happen at a Burns Night Supper.

Which major historical event influenced his writing? Why was this?

How do you think the poem 'The Mouse', shows his 'tolerance and compassion' for living things?

Which song is sung on New Year's Eve?

What does the word 'reworking' suggest about this song?

What is the job of a subheading.

What is the poem Tam o'Shanter about?

Identify THREE more words which mean the same as 'wealthy'.

Match the word with its meaning.

agate stone

a dish containing the heart, lungs and liver of a sheep

cravat

a musical instrument with reed pipes

bagpipe

a wide strip of fabric worn around the neck by men

haggis

to accept or put up with new ideas or situations

tolerance

a colourful gemstone