

**Robert Burns** (1759-1796), Scotland's national bard, came to prominence just as the Founding Fathers of the United States were drafting the U.S. Constitution. Burns's passion for life, love, liberty, justice, nature (what we now call "the environment") and honest expression, sometimes got him into trouble with authorities in the church, the government and the elites of British society.

An English officer once challenged him to a duel (fortunately it never took place!) because, after a toast to the health of the British prime minister, Burns raised a toast "to the health of a much better man – **George Washington!**" Burns's tribute to Washington's birthday includes the lines about the American Revolution:

See gathering thousands, while I sing,  
A broken chain exulting bring,  
And dash it in a tyrant's face,  
And dare him to his very beard,  
And tell him he no more is feared.

Burns collected traditional tunes and wrote lyrics to them; he said he could not write the words until he had a melody in mind for them. There are 323 songs by Burns, about 60% of his work. He was, like Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan, a songwriter first and foremost!

Robert Burns was a favorite poet of **Abraham Lincoln**, who gave an address about Burns on the centennial of his birthday, 25 January 1859, and later wrote, "I can say nothing worthy of his generous heart and transcending genius."

He risked his freedom and social standing to express his views. As you listen to **Alan Reid** sing here the unofficial anthem of Scotland, Burns's "Scots Wha Hae", read Alan's description of how Burns wrote the song as a comment on events of his day while avoiding arrest for sedition, as had just happened to Thomas Paine for writing *The Rights of Man* (and selling a million and a half copies!).

Burns's humanitarian impulses are part of the Scottish people. Many Scots of his generation came to the American colonies, including teachers of **Thomas Jefferson** and many others who built a new country.

In 1999, when the Scots re-opened their own Parliament for the first time since 1707, Sheena Wellington sang a song by Robert Burns (which the Royal Family tried to strike from the program!) – "A Man's A Man", about the basic humanity of all people. As you hear **Alasdair Fraser** play it on this site, read his thoughtful comments about myth and human rights. A vocal version will be posted later.

Stay tuned, and come visit again!

--Ed Pearlman, January 2017