

Robbie Burns (1759-1796) was the son of a tenant farmer and started working life at 15 as a farm labourer. He later worked as an excise man (for an overview of his life, see: <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/Robert-Rabbie-Burns/>). His 'lowly' start in life notwithstanding, he was to find lasting fame worldwide as a poet and lyricist, primarily noted for being Scotland's 'national bard' (eg <https://www.scotland.org/events/burns-night/the-poetry-of-robert-burns>). We ought to celebrate him, however, not just as a poet but also a political thinker, a significant source of that worldview that, today, is usually called 'ecocentrism'.



Of course, he has many other claims to fame. Burns wrote some of the greatest love songs ever, the best being, in my book, 'Ae Fond Kiss' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2aUiYt4whA> ; see also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax021N4iaFU> , Robyn Stapleton being one of the best Burns interpreters around).

Burns wrote one of the best odes to friendship ('Willie Stewart': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aoVJ4W2UOg>). Then, there was his powerful critique of elitism and unearned privilege, 'A Man's A Man for a' that' (

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/mans-man-0/>). Also note this attack on the preening rich landowners of his day: <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/address-beelzebub/> He saw the legal system and the church as protectors of the rich and powerful against the poor and dispossessed, (see the final verse here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/robertburns/works/the_jolly_beggars_love_and_liberty_a_cantata/). This was of course the era of the brutal 'Clearances' in the Highlands.

The 1792 'Slave's Lament' is not perhaps the great abolitionist but Burns was, once again, ahead of his time again (<https://www.historyscotland.com/history/frederick-douglass-and-robert-burns-the-american-abolitionist-and/#:~:text=A%20radical%20whose%20political%20outlook,%3A%2FTorn%20from%20that%20love%20ly>).

He corresponded with some of the leading radicals of his day, including the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and backed causes such as independence for Ireland and the American colonies. He stood on the side of liberty, equality, and fraternity, his stance including defence of revolutionary France (https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/robertburns/works/the_tree_of_liberty/#:~:text=Heard%20ye%20o%27%20the%20tree,in%20leading%2Dstrings%2C%20man).

This side of his politics is summed up in 'Scots Wha Hae':

*Lay the proud usurper low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow!
Let us do or die!*

It is no wonder that the 'powers-that-be' of his period tried to shut him up. But he also attacked hot-headed 'revolutionaries and the 'system changers' of his time, well aware that political violence not only maims and kills often innocent people but also poison would-be liberators (https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/robertburns/works/ye_jacobites_by_name/)

I want to stress, however, that Burns also belongs in the political ecology hall of fame. A post below argues that the real barrier to the sustainable common good of life on Earth is not this or that economic system. Nor is any particular technology, though nuclear weapons do indeed pose a catastrophic threat. The biggest obstacle reside in human hubris and the anthropocentric fallacy that humans are above and apart from the rest of nature.

Just read 'Ode to a mouse' and you can see that Burns appreciated the threat from 'man's dominion' to other forms of life (<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/mouse/>) . Thus, from the former:

*I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!*

See also: <https://www.robertburns.org/works/258.shtml> and https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/robertburns/works/on_scaring_some_water_fowl_in_loch_turit/).

Or read his letter to Patrick Miller, 1789:

I have always had an abhorrence at this way of assassinating God's creatures without first allowing them those means of defence with which he has variously endowed them; but at this season when the object of our treacherous murder is most probably a Parent, perhaps the mother, and of consequence to leave two helpless nurslings to perish with hunger amid the pitiless wilds, such an action is not only a sin against the letter of the law, but likewise a deep crime against the morality of the heart.—We are all equally creatures of some Great Creator

One study notes that, across his works, Burns make 236 references to flowers (37 different species), 154 references to trees (26 species), 835 references to landscape elements (rivers, mountains, woods...), 170 references to seasons, 350 allusions to the weather. This was a man fully attuned to the rest of nature.

Read 'Sweet Aflon' for example:

*How pleasant thy banks and green vallies below,
Where wild in the woodlands the primroses blow;
There oft, as mild ev'ning leaps over the lea,
The sweet-scented birk shades my Mary and me.*

Or read his celebration of the Birks of Aberfeldy: <https://www.robertburns.org/works/182.shtml>

Statue of Robert Burns at
Birks of Aberfeldy



He had a powerful sense of place. Just read Tam O' Shanter. For example:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43815/tam-o-shanter> He proudly celebrates Scotland's mountains and rivers: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43806/from-lines-to-william-simson> He even advocated reforestation eg <https://www.robertburns.org/works/183.shtml>

The post below bemoans the impact of the blood sports industry on the Scottish Highlands. Burns was alive to that. Read the first line here: <https://www.robertburns.org/works/31.shtml> He also links the violence against the poor in his era to violence against the rest of nature (<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/the-twa-dogs/>). I'd suggest that he was alert to the

way that 'technofixes' and centralised planning can so easily backfire. Go back to his poem 'To a Mouse' and read:

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

A final point and perhaps now I am reading too much into Burns. I'd like to think that if he were alive today, he would be contemptuous of the current wave of Identity Politics and 'Genderism', and self-ID. After all, referring to the Buchanite religious sect, he indicted them as "one of the many instances of the folly in leaving the guidance of sound reason, & common sense." Indeed his words could be applied to ideas and movements today!

Of course, Burns had his flaws. He was not perfect but who is? Many might criticise his attitude to women, for example. He was inevitably a man of his period. In this particular respect, it might be noted, however, that he does not seem to have made many female enemies in his day, maintaining long friendships with various women.

Unusually for his day, he provided for all the children he sired, legitimate or otherwise. In his 'Rights of Women', he says they "merit some attention" (https://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/robertburns/works/the_rights_of_woman/). That might sound a bit tepid yet his views are still a step ahead of the dominant attitude of his time.

But in his attitude towards the rest of nature, he really did make a remarkable contribution for all times.

