

Script – Film 2 – Burns Birthplace Museum

I've come to the cottage where Robert Burns was born in Alloway in Ayrshire to ask David Hopes, Director of the Burns Birthplace Museum, why Burns is still an important figure in Scottish culture.

Has there been a revival of Burns work or has he always been popular?

I think he's always been popular. I mean he was really popular after the publication of his first book back in 1786 and the growth in Burns popularity from that point has been exponential I'd say. There have been many revivals, for example, around anniversaries of his birth and death, but his fame has been on a steady increase since 1786.

When did the tradition of Burns suppers begin?

The tradition of Burns suppers started in 1801 in this very room in what was then the lounge of a bar because Burns cottage was a pub for over 100 years. So they had a dinner of sheep's head, sheep's head, and haggis. They used the address to the haggis and the Reverend Hamilton Paul who convened the meeting composed a special ode and at the end of the meeting and lots of toasts, they were Freemasons who liked their drink, they agreed to meet on the poet's birthday next year. Unfortunately, they got the wrong date, they met on the 29th January instead of the 25th but, nonetheless, the tradition was established of the Burns supper.

Why is Burns remembered over and above other Scottish writers?

I think people relate to Burns perhaps more than other Scottish writers. I think another one of the reasons is that he mentions so many places in his work. For example, in Tam o'Shanter, Burns immortalises the place of his birth by throwing an imaginary web over the village of Alloway. Lots of the buildings mentioned in the poem are still here, so when people visit these historic buildings, they're visiting the poem as well. So place and poetry are closely linked.

(Extract from 'Tam o'Shanter')

*Now, do thy speedy utmost, Meg,
And win the key-stane o' the brig;
There at them thou thy tail may toss,
A running stream they dare na cross.*

Is his work as relevant today as it was when he was alive?

I think in some cases, it's more relevant because of those enduring themes, the worldly themes. For example, in the referendum in 2014, Burns' work was cited by both camps, the 'yes' and the 'no' camps. I think some of the themes he spoke about have certainly passed by, but a lot of the themes, for example in 'A Man's a Man for 'a that', themes of equality and freedom, we all can relate to even now.

(Extract from 'A Man's a Man for 'a that')

*That Man to Man the world ower,
Shall brother's be for a' that.*