

**ROBERT BURNS: A
BIRTHDAY ADDRESS ON
THE LIFE AND CHARACTER
OF THE PLOWMAN BARD**

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Robert Burns: a birthday address on the life and character of the plowman bard by Samuel Phelps Leland

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SAMUEL PHELPS LELAND

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ROBERT BURNS;

Birthday Address

ON THE

LIFE AND CHARACTER,

OF THE

FLOWMAN BARD,

BY

SAMUEL PHELPS LELAND.

1836.

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Grindef Tolitten Pickard

A "leafy June" spent on the banks of the "bonnie Doon" and amid the fields made immortal by Burns' songs, and among a people rich with contentment, and the traditions of the bard, is the origin of the following. There may be nothing new in it, but I trust it will do the poet's memory no ill.

ROBERT BURNS.

ABOUT two miles south of the little city of Ayr, and so close beside the highway that there is no yard in front, is a little thatched-covered, clay cottage. It stands near "Alloway's old haunted kirk," and behind it the clear waters of the "bonnie Doon" ripple between grassy lawns, or in the shade of over-hanging trees. In this cottage, on the 25th day of January, 1759, was born the most strangely gifted child of genius that his age produced. His checkered life, in many respects, was a wonderful one. Few men were ever more praised and idolized than he. Few men of genius ever died more neglected and alone. And, after death, few men have ever risen higher in popular estimation, or attained a stronger hold on the hearts of their countrymen. The man of highest culture, and the peasant of humblest birth and surroundings, have alike enshrined him in their hearts. His countrymen love him. Wherever the English tongue is spoken, or men of British birth or descent are found, there are admirers of the plowman bard. And this admiration and affection are entirely exceptional. Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, have left the impress of their souls on the world for all time. But they are not *loved* like Robert Burns.

They have never been taken so closely to men's bosoms—they never can be.

The great man and the scholar, love Robert Burns because of his genius and his style. The poor man loves him because of his vigour our assertion of the nobility of manhood. The timid man loves him because the poet has enabled him to bear up more courageously under the proud man's contumely and the insolence of office. The patriot loves him because he has made him love his country more. The youthful lover, because he has voiced so exquisitely his sweetest and tenderest passion. The philanthropist, because his lines glow with sympathy for every living thing. Women love him because of the tenderness of his nature and his songs. Not a wounded hare goes by; not a mouse is turned up in her nest; not a mountain daisy is crushed by the plowshare, but his lines grow tearful with human feeling. In short all love him, with a love, doubtless, all the warmer because of *his* marred and imperfect life, and that he who imparted so much happiness to others, was himself so unhappy.

William Burns, the poet's father, was a very worthy and intelligent man. The poet says of him:

"He was thrown by early misfortunes on the world at large, where he suffered much, and picked up a pretty large quantity of observation and experience, for which I am indebted for most of my little

pretensions to wisdom. I have met few who understood men better than he. But stubborn, ungainly integrity, and headlong, ungovernable irascibility, are disqualifying circumstances, and I was, therefore, born a very poor man's son."

Early in life he went to Edinburgh and worked as a gardener, suffering many privations. Afterwards he migrated to Ayrshire, where he served one gentleman after another as gardener, until, in early summer of 1757, he leased seven acres of land near the Doon and on the land erected a little cottage. Into this in December following he took his young wife, Agnes Brown. She was the daughter of a Carrick farmer, and is described as a very sagacious and handsome woman, a loving mother and dutiful wife. The poet resembled her more than the father in his address and person. But from the father he inherited an irritable and melancholy temperament, which almost drove him to the verge of insanity, and forms, perhaps, an excuse for many of the excesses of his early life, and made his later years so miserable. In this clay cottage the poet was born. The night following his birth the wind blew out the only window in the house, and the mother being alone, was obliged to walk across the street, to the house of a neighbor, for refuge. This cold night, and the rude wind, seemed but a prophecy of his after years, for his whole life was, in his

own words, "frozen by the blast o' Janwaur win' that blew hansel in on him."

The first seven years of his life Robert spent in the cottage in which he was born. After he was six he attended a small school at Alloway Mill. The family then moved upon a small farm about three miles distant, where they lived nearly twelve years. The father, and some of the neighbors, for several years employed a man named Murdock to teach their children. They paid him a small quarterly salary, and lodged him alternately at their houses. This custom is still common in Scotland in sparsely settled districts. Robert was a great favorite of his teacher, and under him he acquired a good education in the common branches, with French, and some knowledge of Latin and Greek.

The land where they lived was poor, and finally, the father being unable to pay the rent, on the death of the *laird*, broke off the lease, and removed with his family to Lochlea, about twelve miles away, where he leased another farm. Here fortune smiled on them for four years. Then a misunderstanding with the landlord about the terms of the lease gave rise to a long lawsuit, the decision of which was against Burns. All his substance was swallowed up in the hungry vortex of litigation and his family reduced to want.

Often, very often, during the dreary years of their poverty, did the whole family spend an evening in tears over some threatening or abusive letter from the lord or factor. These things broke the good man's heart, and crushed his spirit, and "Death, the poor man's dearest friend," came to his relief, and released him from farther war with an adverse and unfriendly world.

To the father's independence and manliness, and to his wise and Christian instruction, the son owed much. In the companionship of such a man many things can be learned not found in books nor taught in colleges. His home was a place of prayerful, restful peace. That father, and mother, and home, the poet has pictured in his "*Walter's Saturday Night*."

At the father's death the care of the large family came upon Robert and his brother Gilbert. And years of great struggle followed. It is a fearful thing to be poor and destitute of life's comforts anywhere; but doubly so, when with this destitution, comes absolute dependence. This, to a proud spirit is painful. This was a trying period of the poet's life. The necessity of work beyond his strength, the rigid economy practiced, and the insufficiency of food, stamped their influences on him, and, doubtless, intensified the tendency to melancholy and that