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STRETCH OUT!

Speaker honours great Scottish bard

Speaker at Unionville dinner brings lifetime of interest in Robbie Burns

BY FRED SIMPSON
 Staff Writer

Every day was ladies day for the immortal Scottish bard, Robbie Burns. "He was loved by the ladies and loved them in return," says J.T. Walters, who will be observing Robbie Burns Day today, along with every other red-blooded Scot.

"He had quite a few loves in his life, but also a lot of disappointments," says Walters.

Walters, 70, was born two miles from the Burns cottage in Ayr, a seaside port in the lowlands on the west coast of Scotland.

For the past 40 years, he has been immortalizing Burns on the speaker's circuit and wherever else his name comes up.

'Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And never brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And auld lang syne?'

"I've been preaching about Burns in public for all those years and I still get goosebumps whenever his name comes up," says Walters.

Walters, a retired correctional services officer who lives in Aurora, will share his wealth of knowledge about the poet Thursday at the Heritage Centre for seniors in Unionville.

"I will open the evening's festivities with a wee sip of whisky," says Walters, "and then the piper will bring in the haggis."

Also attending the Robbie Burns dinner will be Solicitor General Dave Tsubouchi and Markham Regional Councillor Gord Landon.

"Burns is the first world poet," says Walters, warming up to his subject. "He is a man who was for the people, a man for the earth. He spoke from his heart."

Walters intersperses his glowing comments on Burns with liberal quotes from his songs and poems of love and lassies, religion, death and the devil.

One of his favourites, of course, is

Auld Lang Syne, which has assured Burns' immortality.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And never brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And auld lang syne?"

Walters acknowledges that Burns had his wicked ways, noting that he had 14 children, nine of them illegitimate, but stresses he took all of them under his roof.

One doomed affair, Walters said, produced one of Burns' greatest songs.

"Had we never lov'd sae kindly, Had we never lov'd sae blindly, Never met or never parted, We had ne'er been broken-hearted."

Walters has a staggering complement of books about Burns — seven volumes with five books in each volume.

"And I have read them all," says Walters.

"I still read Burns at home because something comes up about him all the time."

He chuckles as he recalls one anecdote.

"When Burns met his first wife, Jean Armour, her father was against it because he didn't think Burns would ever make a name for himself."

He also relates that Burns, a poor farmer in his early days, remained a poor man for most of his life. Burns eventually became a tax collector and held the position until he died.

There was a haberdasher in town that he owed five pounds, around \$15 or \$20, shortly before his death and he couldn't pay it.

"While he lay ill in bed, he told a friend that he would write five pounds of the most beautiful songs that genius ever wrote."

Those were his famous Kilmarnock poems, of which only 612 books were published.

"Today, they are worth 25,000 pounds," says Walters.

He also pooch-poochs the notion that Burns died of drinking and social diseases.

"He died from rheumatic heart fever contracted when he was a young boy," says Walters.

"He wasn't a big drinker at all. I remember an article written by his brother, Gilbert, saying he had been in the company of Burns many times and had never seen him inebriated."

However, the poet got a lot of his material from listening and observing in the pubs.



J.T. WALTERS: Robbie Burns expert is guest speaker at Heritage Centre for seniors in Unionville Thursday.

Burns first gained national prominence with the Kilmarnock poems, which contain most of his best poetry, including The Twa Dogs, The Cotter's Saturday Night, Scotch Drink and To A Mouse.

'Had we never lov'd sae kindly, Had we never lov'd sae blindly, Never met or never parted, We had ne'er been broken-hearted.'

Ceremonies at Burns' dinners have evolved into elaborate affairs.

First, the head table toasts the lassies present. One responds with thanks.

Then the haggis, which Walters refers to as the "caviar of Scotland," is brought to the head table by two bearers to the accompaniment of bagpipes.

The haggis, a sheep's stomach filled with meat, oatmeal, fats and spices, is sliced open.

The diners toast the haggis with drambuie and drip what remains in their glasses into the open haggis.

After dinner, Walters toasts the "immortal memory" of Robbie Burns and begins his speech.

Burns, says Walters, was intent on preserving Scottish folk songs and airs.

"Burns never accepted money for compiling his songs. He believed it was his duty to his beloved Scotland."

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