

**THE IMMORTAL MEMORY SPEECH**  
**BURNS NIGHT**  
**JANUARY 27, 1996**

Exactly two hundred thirty-seven years and two days ago, the man who brings us here tonight, Robert Burns, was born in the village of Alloway in Scotland. On July 21st of this year, two hundred years will have passed since that same man's death.

That man lived in places called Alloway, Mount Oliphant, Lochlie, Mossgiel, Edinburgh, and Dumfriesshire--places so far removed from our own Texas, San Antonio, Boerne, Alamo Heights, Leon Valley, and Castle Hills that most of us cannot even pronounce the Burns names, let alone find them on a map.

Not only are we separated by time and by geography, the man purposely wrote his most famous poetry in a Scottish dialect that not even present day Scottish folk speak; they can guess at it, but no knows for sure how Burns would read his own poetry. Technology and language, as well as time and space, separate us tonight from Robert Burns.

And yet we have gathered to celebrate his immortal memory--a memory that includes references to battles and to heroes that we know about only in history books. Listen as Robert Burns puts his own words into the mouth of Robert Bruce, as Bruce addresses his troops just before the battle of Bannockburn:

SCOTS WHA HAE [1793] pp. 270-271

Scots, <i>wha hae wi'</i> Wallace bled!	<i>who have with</i>
Scots, <i>wham</i> Bruce has <i>aften</i> led!	<i>whom: often</i>
Welcome to your gory bed,	
Or to Victory!	

What does a battle like Bannockburn and men like Wallace or Bruce mean to a people and a generation and a place that glorifies instead the battle of the Alamo and men like Travis and Crockett?

The simple, obvious, answer, of course, lies in what and how Robert Burns wrote--not at what time he wrote it, or where he wrote it, or in what dialect of what language. When Robert Burns wrote of Bannockburn--of Wallace and of Bruce and the men who fought with them--he wrote of all battles and all generals and all soldiers and fighters everywhere, at any time. In twenty words, Burns summed up the glory and the horror of battle so simply and so eloquently that a hundred years after his birth, translations of "Scots wha hae'" existed in dozens of languages--such as the German:

Schotten, die Wallace Blut Geweiht,  
Bruce so oft gefuhrt zum Streit;  
Grab sind Sieg, sie sind bereit,  
Auf deme, schliezt die Reih!

*(Dr. Legerlotz, 1893)*

Aye, lads. Aye, lasses. I admit: it's not the same.

Scots wha hae! Remember the Alamo! It's really not the same; and that's why we have gathered tonight to draw renewed strength from our heritage with Robert Burns, the brilliant Scottish poet who wrote about universal themes that transcend time and place and technology and language and dialect. He wrote exquisitely in his poems and epitaphs and epigrams and songs and ballads and letters about his friends, his enemies, heroes, lovers, his dogs, mice, death.

But, most importantly, he wrote about the overall humanness that makes a famous eighteenth century Scots literary genius and a roomful of twentieth century Texas middle class muddlers feel a common self-worth.

A MAN'S A MAN FOR A'THAT [1795]

Is there for honest Poverty  
That hings his head, an' a' that?  
The coward slave--we pass him by,  
We dare be poor for a' that!  
For a' that, and a' that,  
Our toils obscure, an' a' that,  
The rank is but the quinea's stamp  
The man's the *gowd* for a' that. *gold*

What though on hamely fare we dine,  
Wear [hoddin grey], an' a' that; *cotton denim*  
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,  
A man's a man for a' that!  
For a' that, an a' that,  
Their tinsel show, an' a' that;  
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,  
Is king o' men for a' that!

Ye see yon *birkie* ca'd a lord, *proud fellow*  
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that;  
Tho hundreds worship at his word,  
He's but a *coof* for a' that: *blockhead*  
For a' that, an a' that,  
His ribband, star, an' a' that;  
The man of independent mind,  
He looks at laughs at a' that.

A prince can make' a belted knight,  
A marquis, duke, an' a' that;  
But an honest man's *aboon* his might *above*  
Gude faith, he *mauna fa'* that! *must not attempt*  
For a' that, an a' that,  
Their dignities an' a' that;  
The pith o' sense, an' pride o' worth,  
Are higher rank than a' that.

Then let us pray that come it may  
As come it will for a' that  
That sense and worth, o'er all the earth,  
Shall *bear the gree*, an' a' that! *be the victors*  
For a' that, an a' that,  
That Man to Man, the world o'er,  
Shall brothers be for a' that!

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Ladies and Gentlemen please be upstanding and share with me  
a toast to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns:

TO ROBERT BURNS--AN HONEST MAN . . .

. . . AN A' THAT!

Scott Baird  
January 17, 1996  
Trinity University

[All three poems come from Grant F. O. Smith, The Man Robert Burns,  
Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1940. pp. 270, 271, and 275-276,  
respectively. I inserted the "cotton denim" in A MAN'S A MAN FOR  
A'THAT]