

The Legend of the Burns Supper

Written by Clark McGinn, author of *The Ultimate Burns Supper Book* and *The Ultimate Guide To Being Scottish*.

In 1801, on the fifth anniversary of the death of Robert Burns, nine men who knew him met for dinner in Burns Cottage in Alloway to celebrate his life and works. The Master of Ceremonies was a local minister a liberal theologian and an equally liberal host. Hamilton Paul and his guests shared Masonic brotherhood with Rabbie and Paul devised an evening which looked a bit like a lodge ceremonial, centred on a fine fat haggis; with recitation and singing of Burns's works and a toast (in verse) to the memory of their friend and hero.

It was such a jolly evening, all agreed to meet again the following January for a Birthday Dinner for the bard, little knowing that they had invented a global phenomenon that we know as the BURNS SUPPER which still broadly follows the Reverend's original plan.

Burns's popularity grew rapidly after his untimely death and the idea of meeting annually to share his poems and songs in the bonds of friendship caught the public imagination. Some Ayrshire merchants in Greenock followed with the first Burns Club Supper in January 1802 and the West coast towns with strong links to Rabbie reached out and joined in the new festival: Paisley, Irvine, Kilmarnock and Dumfries.

Typically, a dozen or more men sat down to dine - as often working men as the middle classes - sometimes in a bar Rab had frequented. But the real link was his poetry with its message of love, freedom and the essential value of humanity. Many early suppers were organised by Burns Clubs who exist today, but a big boost in participation came with the big literary Burns Suppers, the original organised by Sir Walter Scott in Edinburgh in 1815 with Hogg the Ettrick Shepherd giving the Immortal Memory.

Going Global

The first Supper outwith Scotland was at Oxford University in 1806 (hosted by a few Glasgow students) with London seeing its first Bard-day party in 1810. Wherever there were Scots merchants trading in the English county towns, festivals sprung up over the next twenty years.

The format was popular - whether as part of a wider club or an annual combination of party and poetry. In those days many Scots received a good education at home then packed off to foreign climes to seek a fortune (or at least build the empire) and the Burns Supper followed them. Army officers held Indias first supper as early as 1812; traders travelled about the same time to Canada and were Addressing the Haggis in a colder January wind than they'd remembered back home; merchants and ministers (and maybe even a few convicts) carried Burns's works to Australia with Festivals from 1823 and the first formal Burns Supper in 1844; while the poets own nephew helped found the city and Burns Club of Dunedin in New Zealand.

It would be wrong to see the Burns Supper as a purely imperial story. From the early publication of Rabbie's works in Philadelphia, America had warmed to his talent and a philosophy which chimed with the new-born Columbia thus bringing the Burns Supper to a wider range of people than just the Diaspora. Similarly, in the twentieth century, Burns and his supper jumped the wall into the two communist superpowers as China and particularly Russia embraced a herald of the poetical red dawn.

Even today, Russian Januaries abound with exuberant Burns Suppers! And in terms of cross cultural fertilisation, the modern invention of Gung Haggis Fat Choy combining the Scots and Chinese heritages of Vancouver would be a party that Burns would certainly smile at!

The Legacy of the Burns Supper

It is a unique legacy. No other poet is fêted across the world on his birthday and it is spontaneous - no central body writes the rules, or organises the speakers, or sets the tone. Like Rabbie, the Burns Supper is totally open to all.

In 2009, the Homecoming year - his 250th anniversary - saw hundreds of Burns Suppers as an important part of the special celebration's programme so visitors and residents could join in the fun and festival which is the basis as the First Minister said: to honour Burns himself as well as those who keep his legacy alive in Scotland and across the world today.

So however you celebrate Burns Night, whether you host a grand banquet, or even just have a few friends around the kitchen table: take your haggis, relish his poems and, of course raise a generous toast to his genius and you're sharing in a gift that Scotland has given the whole world - which started simply with nine men in a cottage and now resounds throughout the globe!

Clark McGinn biography

Clark McGinn comes from Ayr but has been speaking at Burns Suppers for what his audience often says is a long, long time. He is the author of the popular [The Ultimate Burns Supper Book](#) based on his experiences internationally and has just published [The Ultimate Guide To Being Scottish](#).

The Burns Supper – What to expect

These informal suppers vary from club to club but the general format has remained the same since Burns' friends hosted the first recorded night in his honour around the anniversary of his death in 1801. They held the following Burns supper on what they thought was his birthday, 29 January 1802, but in 1803, they discovered the Ayr parish records that noted his date of birth was actually 25 January 1759. Since then, suppers have been held on or about 25 January.

Guests gather as at any informal function and the host says a few words of introduction before everyone is seated and the Selkirk Grace is said. A starter of soup, usually a Scots broth or Cock-a-Leekie, is eaten, before the centrepiece of the meal, a haggis, is brought in while a piper plays the bagpipes. The host then recites Address to a Haggis and at the lines His knife see rustic Labour dight, An' cut you up wi' ready slicht', draws and cleans a knife and plunges it into the haggis, slicing it open from end to end in dramatic fashion. A toast is then proposed to the haggis. Mashed potatoes (champit tatties) and turnips (bashed neeps) traditionally accompany the haggis.

When the meal is over, one of the guests makes a speech commemorating Burns and proposes a toast to the great man, known as the Immortal Memory. A toast is then made to the lassies' in recognition of Burns' fondness for the fairer sex and sometimes a female guest will reply with a humorous toast to the laddies'. Following the speeches there may be singing of songs by Burns and occasionally guests take to the floor in a whirl of Burns Scottish country dancing known as a cilidh, although this is not a normal part of a Burns supper.

Finally, to conclude the evening everyone stands, joins hands and sings the song most associated with Burns worldwide, Auld Lang Syne a song which has become an international anthem of brotherhood and has been translated into more than thirty languages.

The most important thing about a Burns Supper is to have fun. After all, the man you're paying tribute to was certainly not averse to a wee party himself!

Saint Andrew Society of Sarasota & the associated Robert Burns Club annually host a Burns Supper to honor Scotland's Bard and commemorate the anniversary of his birth. Look for this year's invitation,