

BOBBIE BURNS AND THE CHURCH

by Tom Cox

Scots have held annual celebrations on Robert Burns's birthday since 1801. These have become annual love fests celebrating all things Scottish, and regular fixtures in Scottish society. Many a Presbyterian church, acknowledging its Scottish roots, has participated. Pocatello's First Presbyterian Church has been among them. For many years, First Presbyterian held "Scotch Concerts" on January 29th or thereabout. Participants decked out in Scottish garb, Highland dancers participated, pipers played, various of Burns's poems were read and musical compositions sung, and a variety of other entertainment was entered into.

The whole thing is immensely ironic. In the first place, January 29 was not Burns's birthday, even though the folk who held the first celebration in 1801 thought it was. Church records in his native Ayrshire show he was actually born on January 25. Moreover, although Burns is remembered for his romantic paeans to the Highlands and their people, he himself was not a Highlander. Burns may have won Scottish affection when he famously proclaimed "My heart is in the Highlands" and wrote in the Scots dialect so firmly entrenched there, but he himself only visited there briefly. He was, simply, a romantic caught up in the re-discovery of the Scottish identity that was taking place in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, an identity that was defined in large part by re-emphasizing Scotland's non-English side, a side that could be seen most clearly in the Highlands.

Although the Scotch Concerts were immensely successful fundraising ventures, for a Presbyterian church to make a big thing out of Burns's birthday goes beyond the ironic — it was ludicrous. Burns was a wholly secular figure. He had little or nothing to do with churches — Presbyterian or otherwise — and lived a life that religious folk found utterly scandalous. He rarely if ever darkened the doorway of the churches of the various communities where he lived. Furthermore, the Presbyterian church was for many years a largely Lowland institution, the Highlands on which he heaped such praise still being largely, one might even say intensely, Catholic during his lifetime.

So what should we do as, once again we approach January 29th? Should we just forget the Scottish heritage that undergirds so much of Presbyterian experience and practice and live in the present? We'll be poorer if we do. But we don't need to try to make Burns into something that he wasn't.

There are other more appropriate dates we could seize upon to celebrate our roots. April 6 is the anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath, the Scottish document often likened to the American Declaration of Independence and one supported at the time by Scottish religious and secular leaders alike. Congress has recognized the date by declaring it National Tartan Day in the United States, a day acknowledging the many Scottish contributions to this country. There is November 30, St. Andrew's Day. The Scottish flag bears the cross of St. Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland, and his day has become one for celebrating Scottish nationhood both in and out of the church. And there are other dates that fit the bill.

We forget our past to our peril, but there is no reason to seize upon pseudo-history and romantic nonsense in trying to make it relevant to the present. To the Scotch Concerts celebrating Burns's birthday, we should simply say "rest in peace."