



Famous Names

Robert Burns

(Poet Laureate of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning No.2 Edinburgh)



During the last quarter of the 18th Century, Freemasonry was at the height of its popularity. To the Age of Enlightenment, its tenets seemed to promise brotherhood and intellectual equality. Scholars, philosophers, gentlemen, farmers and tradesmen were Masons in Scotland.

Burns was a Mason from 1781 until his death. He was initiated on 4th July 1781, in St David's Lodge, No. 174, Tarbolton. He was passed and raised in the same Lodge on 1st October 1781. Less than a year later, the old members of St James's Kilwinning Lodge — which had amalgamated with St David's — broke away, seized the effects of the St James's Lodge, and reopened it. Burns was among those concerned in the disruption who went over to St James's. He was elected Depute Master of St James's on 27th July 1784, a position he held for 4 years.

It was partly because of his Masonic connections that Burns was so widely received when he arrived in Edinburgh in 1786. For among his fellow masons in Ayrshire were Sir John Whitefoord, James Dalrymple of Orangefield, Sheriff Wallace of Ayr, Gavin Hamilton, the Provost of Ayr, John Ballantine, Professor Dugald Stewart, Dr John Mackenzie of Mauchline, William Parker of Kilmarnock and many others; among the less exalted brothers were the tailor, Alexander Wood, James Humphrey the 'noisy polemic' and John Wilson, the schoolmaster.

When he reached the capital, Burns was made a member of Canongate Kilwinning Lodge No 2 Edinburgh. Tradition alleges that members also made him their Poet Laureate. Among the members of this Lodge were Lord Elcho, Lord Torphichen, the Earl of Eglinton, the Earl of Glencairn, Patrick Miller of Dalswinton, Lord Pitsligo, Alexander Cunningham, the lawyer, William Nicol the schoolmaster, William Creech the publisher, Henry Mackenzie the lawyer and author, and Alexander Nasmyth the painter.

Burns received honorary membership from Loudoun Kilwinning, at Newmilns, on 27th March 1786, and from St John's Kilwinning, Kilmarnock, on 26th October 1786. In company with Ainslie, Burns received the Royal Arch degree from St Abb's Lodge No 70, on 19th May 1787, at Eyemouth. On 27th December 1791, when he had moved to Dumfries, Burns became a member of St Andrew's Lodge No 179. He was elected Senior Warden in 1792. He last visited this lodge three months before his death.



February 1787 Burns was made the Poet Laureate of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning, No. 2 Edinburgh.