

A Poem Newly Sprung in Fairview

by CLARK AYCOCK

Have you ever sung “Auld Lang Syne” on New Year’s Eve? Or have you ever uttered the phrase, when frustrated, “the best-laid schemes of mice and men...”? Did you know that John Steinbeck’s classic book *Of Mice and Men* was based on a line in a poem written “To a Mouse”... or that a Tam O’ Shanter cap was named after a character in a poem by that name? And did you know that singer and songwriter Bob Dylan said his biggest creative inspiration was the poem and song “A Red, Red Rose”? Yes, we are talking about the works of world-renowned Scottish poet Robert Burns, who lived in Ayrshire, Scotland from 1759 until his untimely death in 1796.

Perhaps the main reason so many people are familiar with Robert Burns is that his themes and language were of everyday life. He used small subjects, most notably the mouse, to express big ideas. Like many Scots, Burns was well-educated, and was

therefore able to write in the local Ayrshire dialect, as well as in “Standard” English. He wrote many romantic poems that are still recited and sung today, and some of us may remember his songs more easily than we do his poetry.

Robert Burns influenced many other poets including Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. Walter Scott was also a great admirer and wrote this wonderful description of Burns that provides us with a clear impression of the man. “*His person was strong and robust; his manners rustic, not clownish, a sort of dignified plainness and simplicity which received part of its effect perhaps from knowledge of his extraordinary talents...I think his countenance was more massive than it looks in any of the portraits... there was a strong expression of shrewdness in all his lineaments; the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large, and of a dark cast, and literally glowed when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye*



in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time.”

In the late 1700s, many Scots migrated from the Piedmont into the mountains of WNC, bringing with them their country’s culture and craft and inherent connection with Burns. One Scotsman who shares that connection is Fairview’s Tom Milroy. Although born in Yorkshire (England), Tom is of Scottish and Basque ancestry. He came to North Carolina in the 1970s to study at UNC-Chapel Hill and lived in the Triangle area for over 30 years. But then, being a mountain man at heart, he moved to Fairview about five years ago.

In 2016, Tom traveled to Glasgow to spend time with his girlfriend, Linda Rose. The couple drove into the Ayrshire countryside with no particular destination in mind. She spotted a wee post office on the side of the road and asked Tom to pull over so that she could mail a postcard she had been carrying around for weeks. When she returned, she pointed out that there was a Robert Burns museum on the other side of the road.

Unwittingly, the couple had arrived in Alloway, the birthplace of Burns and site of the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum. The museum, which incorporates the cottage where Robert Burns was born, contains thousands of artifacts,

A commemorative plate showing Robert Burns in the center surrounded by characters from his poems

including many of his handwritten manuscripts. On the grounds, you can walk in Tam O’ Shanter’s footsteps, including over the Brig o’ Doon, the 15th-century bridge that is a critical part of the famous poem. It is not surprising

that Tom and Linda Rose lingered at the museum for the rest of that lovely summer day.

That memory was still fresh in Tom’s mind when he participated in a workshop on Scottish poetry at the John C. Campbell Folk School near Brasstown (in WNC) in August 2019. It was taught by Bobbi Pell, who has written several books about Celtic tales and Scottish

lore. It was Scottish Heritage Week at the school, and it was inspiring for Tom to be among such an amazing group of harpists, weavers, blacksmiths, calligraphers, singers, instrument-makers, chefs and others. One of the assignments given by Pell during the poetry workshop was to write a poem from the perspective of a minor character in literature, a technique called *dramatis personae*. Tom chose to write from the

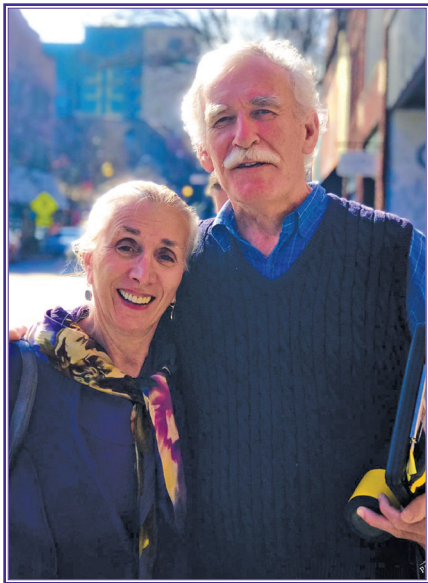
During a workshop on Scottish poetry, Tom was given the assignment to write a poem from the perspective of a minor character in literature. He chose to write from the point of view of Kate O’ Shanter, the wife in Robert Burns’ “Tam O’ Shanter.”

Inspired by Robert Burns A Celebration in Poetry, Music and Song

Monday, August 31 7:30 pm

The *Town Crier* and the Fairview Public Library present a celebration of some of the works of Robert Burns, featuring people who have been inspired by his words and songs. *You must first register with the library before attending this free Zoom event.* To find a direct link to the registration page, go to fairviewtowncrier.com/links.

Tom Milroy will read two poems by Burns and then his own creation, “Kate O’ Shanter.” Andrew Geller will play the bagpipes, which he studied after attending a Burns Supper at Tom’s house in Durham. He has been a prizewinner at the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games. And Daniel Shearin of the Asheville-based band River Whyless, which has toured in the US and Europe, will perform a few of Burns’ songs. A singer-songwriter and Grammy-nominated recording engineer, Shearin led the audience in the singing of “Auld Lang Syne” at the Orange Peel in Asheville on New Year’s Eve 2018.



On a drive through the Scottish countryside, Linda Rose Macfarlane and Tom Milroy stopped to mail a postcard at a small post office—which just happened to be across the street from the Burns Cottage.

point of view of Kate O' Shanter, the wife of Tam O' Shanter in Burns' poem. The result was Tom's poem, entitled "Kate O' Shanter."

Before we get to why you're reading about Tom now, you need to know a little bit more about Burns and his legacy.

Some readers of the *Crier* might have celebrated the life and works of Burns by participating in a Burns Supper. Every year, on or around Burns' birthday (January 25), these celebrations are held all over the world. The first supper, held in 1801 with Burns and nine friends, was a huge success. A modern supper usually includes a meal (featuring a course of haggis) followed by toasts and speeches honoring the poet. These are followed by recitations of some of his poetry and singing of some of his songs. At the end of the evening, all participants stand and sing "Auld Lang Syne."

Tom and his family used to organize Burns Suppers regularly when he lived

in Durham. These events made a big impression on Tom's friend, Sprague Cheshire, who described his first Burns Supper as follows: "I did not know Tom very well at that time and had a working knowledge of Burns but definitely not in-depth insights into the poet and the man," he said. "That night turned out to be life changing for me. Tom had put together an event that was far beyond anything I could ever have imagined. The poetry, the music, the camaraderie. The highlight of the evening was the 'Toast to the Immortal Memory,' which was about the life and works of Burns delivered by Tom. For close to an hour, he kept the sizable crowd enthralled with a discourse so humorous, so bawdy, so erudite and so brilliant that I felt I was in the presence of some kind of wild, eccentric genius."

Like so many others who have attended Burns Suppers, Sprague became inspired
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Kate O' Shanter

Written in August 2019 in the mountains of North Carolina by Tam O' Fairview (Tom Milroy) and revised with the help of Hugh Farrell

Kate O' Shanter's greatest sadness
Wa' that drink was driving
Tam tae madness.
Of three nights a week he spent in Ayr
With Suitor Johnnie; they made
quite a pair.
Things were now quite oot o' hand
So Kate determined tae make a stand.
She called him a skellum but
that didn't work
And a drunken bleggum – a bit o' a jerk.
She coaxed and cajoled Tam for
days and days
But her efforts left him quite unfazed.
Soon rumors about Tam and Kirkton
Jean became widespread
And Kate's heart was abreakin'
there alone in her bed.

Now Johnny, being a romantic fella,
Had married a European named Isabella.
She was a seamstress of great renown,
And women flocked tae her
who needed a gown.
Of times when Tam and Johnny
had gone off to Ayr
Kate and Isabella their worries
would share.
One evening they came up with a
wonderful plan
Ye could call it shock-therapy for
Kate's beloved man.

Willing customers o' Isabella
and their daughters
Were recruited as witches to witness
some slaughters.
They sewed their costumes
until after dark.
One seamstress e'en stitched up
a cutty sark.
Another used furs that she had found
To make a costume like a hound.
Meanwhile pipers learned tae
grimace while skirlin'
While dancers learned tae jig
while birlin'.
Then Kate press-ganged
Great Uncle Dick
Tae play the role o' the de'il Nick.

Now Suitor Johnnie was full o' blether
But he could aye predict the weather.
He had seen the auld moon
cradling the new,
So he forecast storms that
grew and grew.

That stormy weekend,
while Tam was drinkin'
Witches and warlocks from their
hooses were slinkin'.
To the ruined Alloway kirk they came
Where Tam would ride on his
road tae hame.

What happened next ye all
know verra well.
For poor Tam thought he
had entered hell.
So, when the witches gave their chase,
Tam drove poor Meg as if 't were a race.

Now in Tam's wee cottage upon a nail
There hangs in glory the
Grey Mare's Tail.
For 'twas Kate who had scared Tam
near tae death in the dark
When, dressed as Witch Nannie
in a Cutty Sark,
She had caught up with Maggie
after dancing a jig
And had yanked her tail off
before the brig.

The lessons learned that night
by Tam and Kate
Ha'e opened up for them a
heavenly gate
Of entire weekends spent together
While old cronies in Ayr
continue tae blether.
Their times together, especially
in their bed,
Are nae like the poppies whose
bloom is shed.
And nae like the snowflakes on the river
There for a moment and then
gone forever.

They now wander the glens in the
glorious gloamin'
Heading for their bothy like twa
pigeons homin'.
And passing the Auld Kirk
in the mist
They pause at the graveyard where
first they kissed.
While they are strolling arm in arm
Kate is nursing nae wrath tae
keep it warm.
Every time Tam thinks o' boozing,
then without fail,
Kate brings up the memory o'
the Grey Mare's Tail.

To enjoy "Kate O' Shanter" to the fullest, it's best
if you're familiar with "Tam O' Shanter."
Find a link to both poems at fairviewtowncrier.com/links.

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to learn more about the life and works of the writer. In 2018, he and his daughter took a trip to Scotland and made sure to visit Ayrshire and the birthplace of Burns, as well as the museum in Alloway. "We stood in the small cottage where Burns came into the world, and there we met Hugh Farrell, a site guide, a Burns scholar, and chairman of the Friends of the Robert Burns Museum. Hugh recited "Tam O' Shanter" in a dramatic fashion and told us tales of Burns and Scotland. I made sure I recorded the name of Hugh Farrell with a feeling that contact with him in the future might be in the cards."

Some months after Tom had written "Kate O' Shanter," he told Cheshire about the workshop he had attended. "Tom then read me his [poem], and it was brilliant," said Cheshire. "I had not known Tom had this poetry writing talent. I'm not sure he did either until he took that workshop. I strongly felt that his poem should be widely shared. At some point in our conversation, a clear vision of Hugh Farrell dramatically reciting Tom's



poem popped into my head." Cheshire told Tom that he should contact Hugh and share his poem with him.

So, Tom decided to try to make contact with Hugh via the Burns Cottage Museum. It took several tries, but he eventually succeeded.

Hugh responded warmly and offered to chat with Tom about "Tam O' Shanter." That call was an amazing moment in Tom's life. He and Hugh discovered that they were born not only in the same year but on the same day. Inspired by that knowledge, Tom decided to recite "Kate O' Shanter" to Hugh over the phone. Hugh, who is much in demand as a speaker at Burns Suppers, liked the poem so much that he subsequently recited the poem at a meeting of the reconvened Bachelors' Club on November 11, 2019. (The club was a rural debating society that was founded by Robert Burns on November 11, 1783. The home of the Bachelors' Club still stands and is now a

museum with period furnishings. The club has been the inspiration for Burns Clubs worldwide. The clubs use poetry, singing and other competitions to honor the memory of Robert Burns.) This was the first meeting of the club since 1809.

Tom has other connections with Burns, too. For example, his mother's maiden name was Burns. She probably disapproved of Burns' reputation with wine and women and so, even though her ancestors came from the same small town (Breachin) on the other side of Scotland that the poet's grandfather was from, she denied any familial connection. Also, Tom's paternal grandmother was born in Tarbolton, home of The Bachelors' Club. It was from residents of Tarbolton that Burns drew inspiration for many of the characters described so vividly in "Tam O' Shanter."

For Old Time's Sake

So, should old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind? Clearly, Tom Milroy is keeping the legacy of Robert Burns alive and well—and all right here in our beautiful mountains.

If you would like to get in touch with Tom, email him at tommilroy@mindspring.com and put "Town Crier" in the subject line.



Above, Hugh Farrell (left) and Sprague Cheshire; below, The Bachelors' Club, Tarbolton



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