



The cold of winter is a great time for setting the world to rights. At least, for talking about setting the world to rights. So, January has been a month of speechifying.

In the second week of term Patrick Adams managed to convince the house to pass a motion in favour of the restoration of the British empire. It was an argument packed with humour and had the whole College in stitches with laughter.

It fell to Brother Moylan, speaking on behalf of the beleaguered colonials, to plead for the status quo to be left intact, taking a few Ozzie sidewipes at 'public-school-types' on the way.

In declamation, it was again Patrick Adams who distinguished himself, along with Etienne Mignot (in joint first place) who gave us another consummate rendition of Victor Hugo. This time we were treated to the moving description of a poor fisherman's love for his wife in *Les gens pauvres*. Nathan Hopkin (3rd place) and Dominic McHugh (2nd place) were also impressive. Dominic's choice of poem - Eugene Field's *Little Boy Blue* - was a surprising one, but his dreamy, philosophical delivery suited the text very well.

Of all the speeches on Burns Night (25th January), Dr Conlon's *Toast to the Lassies* stood out for its originality and sharpness of wit. We reproduce it later in this issue.

It was a fine evening, much enhanced by all of nine pipers from our Breton friends,



Mr Verrier treats Francis and Dominic to a burst of Chopin.

*Askol ba Brug*, in full highland dress. Mr Moore, also in Highland Dress, gave the toast to the Immortal Memory of the bard.

An innovation this term has been an inter-house handball competition, won by Suzannet (decided by a penalty shoot-out). Well done to Mr Moore who played along with his winning house! It seems to be an ideal game for boys of different sizes and is extremely interesting to watch because it is so fast-moving.

Another inter-house event was an indoor games night, involving *just-a-minute* and a host of other crazy games, mostly invented by Mr Duke. A lovely evening of laughter

and general clowning-around was had by all. The winners for the evening were Rochejacquelein.

Mr Jacob's Geography class has been making 3D maps out of papier mache. We are promised a photograph of them for next time.

Sadly, there have been a few setbacks on the cricket front. The Vendee Cricket Club has found another ground for the forthcoming season, which means work on our own field is going to have to proceed at a slower (and cheaper) pace.



Chavagnes was transformed into a little corner of Bonnie Scotland for a few glorious (and noisy) hours on the evening of 25th January. We were honoured to welcome some trainee teachers from England who have been teaching English in the local primary schools, plus the 'France-Grande Bretagne' friendship association from Nantes.



Mr McDermott rendered some Scottish favourites: *Ye Banks and Braes*, *Charlie is my Darling* and *Bobbie Shafto*, skilfully accompanied by Mr Verrier.



Above: Fabrice, escorted by Mr Moore, the Piper and Patrick Adams, who, resplendent in a Highland adaptation of best Chavvers bib and tucker, recited the Ode to a Haggis with a very convincing accent. Our French friends said, "It was vunderfool. Vee didn't understand a vord of eet!"



Above: Padams, Phillipe, Mr Moore, a delightful guest and Dr Conlon, in party mood.

Below: Listening to the pipers.



We are still trying for a couple of soccer fixtures before Easter, and perhaps a basketball game against L'Esperance.

Over half term holiday we will be ordering the new mats for the gym, which will be a help for our pugilists and others.

Junior boys have been participating with laudable enthusiasm in swimming, rowing, cross-country and horseriding as well as the usual team sports (soccer, handball, basketball and even 'capture the flag'.) Latterly, Mr Duke took them for a 7-mile hike to get them in the mood for the Chartres pilgrimage. The Juniors have also been enjoying indoor cricket, getting into the swing of things for summer.

Due to a delay in the renewal of his passport, our chaplain, Father Pilon, has been stranded in Canada since Christmas. That has meant a half-term without daily Mass.

We have simply had to do what Catholics have always done when there is no priest: say the rosary. So daily rosary in Chapel has replaced daily Mass for the last few weeks. Other services (Compline, Spiritual Communion, Fervorino and Night Prayers, etc) have been taken by Mr McDermott and Brother Moylan.

We have also been privileged to receive help from three different priests: Father Archimbaud (the parish priest), Father Idier (a former pupil and teacher at the junior seminary that used to be here at Chavagnes) and Father Richard Greenslade, an Australian priest of the Legionaries of Christ, accompanied by Brother Joel Padgett, from Indiana.

We have had two Sunday Masses celebrated at the College and twice assisted at the Parish Mass. The choir was invited to sing a motet after Communion on the second occasion and Matthew Prall played the trumpet



Dominic happened to be celebrating his thirteenth birthday on the night, and was honoured with 'Happy Birthday' on the pipes.

(with Mr Verrier on the organ) at the beginning of Mass.

We did not miss out on our celebration of the Presentation and the Feast of St Blaise. Candles blessed earlier in the day were lit in the Chapel on the 2nd February and we processed into our places to the chant of *Lumen ad revelationem gentium*. A short service of the readings of the day's Mass, accompanied with hymns, brought our celebration of the Christmas season finally to a close.

The next day (3rd February) Father Archimbaud kindly gave the traditional blessing of throats for the Feast of St Blaise, and heard confessions.

Mrs Asch, Miss Scott, Mr Duke and Mr Verrier took the Junior boys to Nantes



More party-animals at the Chavagnes Burns Night.

for the day at the beginning of February to see a dramatisation of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*. After the play, the boys enjoyed lunch at a traditional Breton creperie, then visited the *Jardin des Plantes* and the Cathedral.

A number of the older boys are studying German for GCSE (some of them now acquit themselves well in five languages!) and this came in useful for a showing of the film *Sophie Scholl*, hosted by Mr Asch. Sophie Scholl and her friends at the University of Munich, inspired by the sermons of the Archbishop of Munich, formed a resistance group that worked against the Nazis. This work of resistance to evil cost most of them lives. The film-showing was in conjunction

with the GCSE History course which includes study of the Second World War.

Meanwhile the Juniors have been enjoying a series of Sherlock Holmes films, chez Mr and Mrs Asch, while studying Conan Doyle in their English classes with Mr Verrier.

Mr Jacob has been building a computer with Joe Dovel, and has brought Mr McDermott into the twenty-first century by migrating all his data from a ten-year-old computer that was starting to groan under the strain.

Mr Duke, a man of action if ever there was one, has been dragooning some

senior boys into some painting and decorating. They have been preparing the senior dorm for repainting after half term. Matthew Prall and John Irving have learnt the useful skill of fitting windows and have put that skill to good use in one or two locations around the building.

A number of older boys play for local football teams and attend weekly practice sessions with local French boys. It was with great sadness that the boys learnt of the tragic death of their young coach who was involved in a lorry accident in mid January. Four boys attended the funeral Mass and we ask you all to remember him in your prayers.

## Juniors' Trip to Nantes



Below: Ten junior boys enjoyed a trip to Nantes on 1st February, for a theatrical adaptation of *Frankenstein*. They also visited the *Jardin des Plantes* and the Cathedral.



## Singing Auld Lang Syne with the Angels

Ferdi McDermott

Last November I had the honour of sharing a simple Thanksgiving ritual with our two American interns at Chavagnes.

It was their first Thanksgiving away from home, and as soon as I realised the importance of this fact I rushed down to our little supermarket and bought them a couple of slices of turkey so that they could comfort themselves with at least one symbol of American identity in this odd, little British corner of France, on a night when they might so easily have given in to a bout of homesickness.

After we had reverently consumed the cold turkey, we each recited an impromptu list of all the things for which we were especially thankful. It was an emotive moment, and reminded me of another ritual that has become a deeply anchored part of my personal calendar since I became a student of Edinburgh University just over fifteen years ago. I am referring to that night of heavily distilled Scottishness that commemorates the nation's most famous and beloved bard, a night known throughout the world simply as Burns Night.

Robert Burns was born into a farming family at Alloway in Ayrshire in 1759. He died in Dumfries at the early age of 37. During his short life he took the Scottish literary world by storm, and secured a place for himself in history and in legend. Every year, lovers of Scotland throughout the world mark the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, the day of his birth (in 1759) with an evening of song, poetry, speeches, comradeship, food and what he affectionately called *Scotch Drink*:

Gie him strong Drink until he wink,  
That's sinking in despair;  
An' liquor guid to fie his bluid,  
That's prest wi' grief an' care;  
There let him bowse an' deep carouse,  
Wi' bumpers flowing o'er,  
Till he forgets his loves or debts,  
An' minds his griefs no more.  
*Solomon's Proverbs*, xxxi. 6,7.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, there are other occasions where people praise each other, celebrate their friendship and let the emotions flow freely; some dry, and others not. I remem-



Robert Burns: 1759 - 1796.

ber experiencing something like this many times at a certain kind of prayer meeting, and similar scenes can be witnessed in Glasgow pubs on most nights of the week. But there is something particularly striking about a setting which combines this with the solidity of ceremony and tradition. It is a noble thing, I think, to confer a sense of the sacred on such a celebration of comradeship and gratitude. It reminds us of the deep dignity of the simplest of our emotions. It does the religious man no harm to remember that these things are always and everywhere sacred, even for non-religious people. After all, *a man's a man, for a' that*, as the Bard would have it. God created men to live in friendship and good cheer, and Burns famously saw through the pessimism of Calvinism to the Catholic truth that all men, places and things have an intrinsic goodness about them that we should try to love.

Somehow January seems just the right time for this kind of consolation. It is such a long month, and in this part of the world much colder and darker than December. The solace in winter that Burns Night undeniably brings is probably the only reason why, in modern times, the Scots managed to resist the public celebration of Christmas for so long; until the nineteen seventies, in fact. They already had one winter feast of loving, forgiving and remembering the poor. Why spend good money on another? (You know how careful the Scots are with their money.)

Thirty years on, we have managed to spoil Christmas (or at least our public observance of it) in Scotland and everywhere else. But the potential for genuine cheer that Burns Night possesses remains mysteriously intact, and so for any of you with the scantiest claim to Caledonian kinship, I recommend its observance without reserve.

Burns and his poetry evoke all the joys and sufferings of raw humanity, and with the help of the whisky that accompanies the other traditional fare for the evening – haggis (a surprisingly delicious sausage made of minced sheep offal, oats, onion and pepper), turnips and potatoes – the event, with all its speeches, laughter and song brings people closer together as they reflect on what makes us human and why, despite its hardships, life is always worth living. (Burns had, incidentally, no time for those who would disagree with this sentiment. In his *On a Suicide*, he harshly quipped: *Earth'd up, here lies an imp o' hell, /Planted by Satan's dibble; /Poor silly wretch, he's damned himsel', /To save the Lord the trouble.*)

Sounding the chords of the shared experience of humanity is like a reverberating bass line: it is the viscerality that we experience when we hear the swell of the lower notes of a chord in an orchestra. - something (literally) that we feel in our gut – and we say that *it strikes a chord*. Burns strikes a chord time and time again.

Scottishness is full of bass notes, but not so much of the alto and soprano. Perhaps it is because of Scotch religion. Protestantism – despite its iconoclastic rejection of so much of humanity's common patrimony – is full of bass notes; notes that it has perfected, tuned and enriched over the last few hundred years.

Scottish culture is about heavy and unobtrusive things: the pipes, haggis, potatoes, predestination. Even the nation's favourite drink, the *Uisce beatha* (water of life) can be very un-nuanced in its effects on man. The architecture too is heavy and solid.

Perhaps all this heaviness owes something also to Scotland's historic poverty, geography, climate and the rugged closeness of its people to the harsh realities of existence.

It is in such circumstances that sometimes the purest and most enduring expressions of human emotions are forged. Because with those bass notes reverberating in our bones, we are apt to express deep emotion with great facility. (The creative fruitfulness of the suffering Irish would be another example.)

Millions living today have (even many times) sung these words of Burns: "Now here's a hand, my trusty friend; and gie's a hand o' thine ... We'll tak' a cup of kindness yet for the sake of auld lang syne." And that moment for all of us, I wager, has often been one of great emotion.

But Burns' passion was not just reserved for brotherly love. His fascination with the ladies was a constant leitmotif of his short life. It puts me in mind of a scandalous thing an old priest of the Isles once said to me, as I enjoyed his Gaelic hospitality: "you'll find us all a bit Jansenist, but at least we enjoy our falls from grace." A similarly bracing (if somewhat theologically problematic) message is found in Burns' popular song, *Green Grow the Rashes O'*.

Green grow the rashes, O;  
Green grow the rashes, O;  
The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,  
Are spent *amang* the lasses, O.

There's nought but care on ev'ry han',  
In ev'ry hour that passes, O:  
What signifies the life o' man,  
An' 'twere *na* for the lasses, O.  
Green grow, &c.

...  
For you sae douce, ye sneer at this;  
Ye're nought but senseless asses, O:  
The wisest man the warl' e'er saw,  
He dearly lov'd the lasses, O.  
Green grow, &c.

Auld Nature swears, the lovely dears  
Her noblest work she classes, O:  
Her prentice han' she try'd on man,  
An' then she made the lasses, O.  
Green grow, &c.

Burns fathered twelve children by four women, including nine by his wife Jean Armour. Seven of his children were illegitimate, including the first four by Jean before they were married in 1788. So the man knew his subject.

One of Burns' most enthusiastic admirers was Dr John Geddes, Catholic bishop and Vicar Apostolic for the Lowlands. He was the elder brother of the biblical critic and priest Alexander Geddes, also known to Burns. John and Alexander Geddes knew something of the harsh, rural life that Burns had lived: the two brothers had been junior seminarians at Scalan, a tiny (illegal) house of formation near Glenlivet for lads destined for the priesthood. They wore the kilt, lived on salmon and porridge, and washed in an icy stream each morning, in a valley surrounded by mountains where, according to Alexander, the sun never shone.

Burns first met Dr John Geddes at the house of Lord Monboddo in Edinburgh during the winter of 1786-7. Geddes took an interest in the poet's work, and was

responsible for persuading five seminaries, including that of the Scots College at Valladolid (of which he had once been Rector) to subscribe to the Edinburgh Edition of Burns' work in 1787. Burns took Geddes's own copy, bound with blank sheets for taking notes, with him on his Highland tour, and delayed returning it for two years.

### Scottish culture is about heavy and unsubtle things: the pipes, haggis, potatoes, predestination.

Writing to Geddes from Ellisland on 3rd February 1789, the poet apologised for having kept the book so long: 'You will see in your book, which I beg your pardon for detaining so long, that I have been turning my lyre on the banks of the Nith. Some larger poetic plans that are floating in my imagination, or partly put in execution, I shall impart to you when I have the pleasure of meeting with you...'

Letters of Bishop Geddes about Burns were recently discovered in a collection held by the Scottish Catholic Archives<sup>2</sup>. They give us an interesting snapshot of Burns' activity in Edinburgh and Ayrshire, at a time when, although on the brink of literary success, he was still effectively on the run from the parents of his future wife, by whom he had already sired two illegitimate children. His star was clearly rising nonetheless. In one letter, Bishop Geddes writes:

"Burns, with whom I am intimately acquainted, though he was only Hireman to his elder Brother until August 1786 and never before that time master of ten pounds: yet read a great deal having been for many years a subscriber to a circulating library at Kilmarnock; had a little chest for holding books at the fireside, and on the Sundays, if the weather was good, instead of going to the Kirk, went to a wood with some Poet[ry]. Amendments were offered to him by Dr Gregory and others; but he would not adopt one of them; because he said; he was to publish his own Poetry. The Excuses he made to me for the Irreligion and some Licentiousness in the book were, that he only attracted the wild notions of the Religionists in the west, and that he had done good [and] that when he published his Poems he was not acquainted with that, [but of that] I am not a competent judge."

In many letters throughout 1787 Geddes introduced, with some considerable zeal, more and more of his acquaintances to the work of Burns:

"You will have heard of the Ayrshire Poet Mr Burns, who was a ploughman until a few months ago. His poems have been lately printed here, and the subscribers were near to three thousand: he has truly a great genius and might improve himself much, as he is only twenty eight years of Age: but, I think, he will not be easily advised: he is one of those, who think for themselves, which to some degrees is laudable. I have been twice in company with him, and we are great friends."

...  
When Burns was made to do public penance for three weeks, after his being admonished by the Kirk for his dalliance with Jean Armour (whom he later married), he recast in immortal Scots the Pharisee's prayer of our Lord's parable, featuring a drunken and debauched elder who has a lively appreciation of God's mercy for himself but not for others. The elder *Holy Willie* praises himself and God in the same breath:

I bless and praise Thy matchless might,  
When thousands Thou hast left in night,  
That I am here afore Thy sight,  
For gifts an' grace  
A burning and a shining light  
To a' this place.<sup>3</sup>

The irony is delicious; and the conceited attitude it commemorates a familiar part of everyone's experience of religion. Of course, we are always ready to see Holy Wille in anyone else but ourselves. But Burns was aware enough of his own wretchedness, and frequently begs Heaven for mercy.

He also, famously, asks for self-awareness:

"O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
To see ourselves as others see us."<sup>4</sup>

A journalist visiting us a couple of years ago was bemused to hear one of our boys talk about St Burns. The poor innocent had assumed that with all the fuss we made of the man he must surely be a saint.

For my part, I certainly pray to meet old Rabbie one day, with his 'enthusiastic heart of love' alongside his generous and courteous friend, Bishop John, if – that is – I am forgiven all my sins as I pray the Power above has forgiven them theirs.

The Bard made these verses for the family of a Minister whose hospitality he once enjoyed. Turning to the angels, we can make them our own: for all those we have loved and lost, and all those we have loved and kept, over the years.

The beauteous, seraph sister-band,  
With earnest tears I pray -  
Thou know'st the snares on ev'ry hand,  
Guide Thou their steps alway.

When, soon or late, they reach that coast,

O'er Life's rough ocean driven,  
May they rejoice, no wand'rer lost,  
A family in Heaven!<sup>5</sup>

NOTES:

1. ie. "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more." Proverbs xxvi 6,7.

2. Facsimiles of some of Geddes' letters can be consulted on line at <http://www.catholic-heritage.net>

3. *Holy Willie's Prayer*

4. In *To a Louse*, where the poet records the shame of a lady in church who is unaware that a large louse is crawling around on her new hat.

5. From *O Thou Dread Power*

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## The Lassies

Dr Thomas Conlon

A certain philosopher concluded a reputedly profound, but at least certainly cryptic, work with the aphorism "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof should one be silent".

What he actually said was "Wovon kann man nicht sprechen, davon muss man schweigen". That may have sounded to you like a not very successful attempt at the Lallans dialect in which Burns wrote and in which Patrick Adams so splendidly addressed the haggis, but in fact it was supposed to be in German.

I find myself wondering why such a sensible piece of advice has been ignored and why I have been asked to propose this toast tonight to the lassies. That however is a question that ought to be directed to our chairman rather than to my good self.

Without wanting at all to question the sagacity and good sense of our chairman's judgment I would just like briefly to plead my unfitness for the task that he has imposed upon me and to solicit your understanding. When I was young I had only one mother and only one sister from whose company I was safely insulated by interposition of an elder brother. At the age of five I was wrenched away from an early exposure to lassies of an equally tender age when I graduated from my mixed infant school. Then I spent the next 13 years in boys only educational establishments. I do not recall this early moment of farewell to the lassies as one of particular trauma or heartbreak and I rather suspect it wasn't. It is true that after thirteen years of confinement to male institutions, I attended a number of universities at

which there was an abundance of young women, some very personable indeed.

However circumspection in this regard had by now become so ingrained in me that I contrived to marry just one of them and then managed to have three sons and no daughters. At the same time I earned my living as an engineer, perhaps the most male-dominated of the secular professions. Finally after feeling that nearly thirty years of this was enough to be getting along with, I should perhaps have made one last attempt to become a socially well rounded person and tried my hand at some honourable activity where I might meet more lassies - like hairdressing, or being a shop assistant or somesuch. However, in fact, I sort of sleepwalked into yet another male dominated institution - this one. All of these shortfalls in my experience of life leave me, as you can see, quite spectacularly underprepared for a speech whose intention is to commend women, in general, to men, in general.

Left to myself the best I could do is to argue that distance lends a certain enchantment, remoteness a certain charm and a life of relative seclusion confers a certain intriguing mystery on that from which one has been secluded.

I am certainly in a position to recommend and admire women as one might admire a painting best seen from a certain distance or recommend a breathtakingly beautiful view best appreciated from a remote standpoint. All in all, a fairly thin justification for the toast I have been asked to propose. You may very well wonder why I should be here attempting to speak to you when I clearly don't know what I am talking about.

So it is just as well it is Burns Night and that Burns engaged in a more, so to

speak, hand to hand, fashion with our subject. I think the point is made by a quick scanning of the titles of his poems : 1. *A lass wi' a tocher* 2. *A poet's welcome to his love-begotten daughter* 3. *A Red, Red, Rose* 4. *Anna, thy charms* 5. *Beware of Bonnie Ann* 6. *Bonnie Peg a Ramsay*, 7. *Bonnie Peggy Alison* 8. *Bonnie Jean a Ballad*. 9. *Clarinda Mistress of my soul* --- and much more in a similar vein. Here indeed speaks the voice of vast experience, perhaps of too much experience, gained at close quarters. Women were clearly not viewed by Burns as if through a glass darkly or as some distant prospect but as a living, very attractive and, indeed, very accessible creatures.

If after all this experience he continually lent his name and his talent to add lustre to the reputation of the lassies, who am I to demur? Mine only to defer to the judgment of a man who clearly *did* know what he was talking about and to propose the traditional toast to the lassies.

"The lassies!"

*Speech given at Chavagnes International College Burns Supper, 2007.*



Seconds of haggis, anyone?



Tiptoe is going from strength to strength. (He particularly liked the left-over haggis.)



Michael Tomlin and Matthew Prall have been making us some delicious soups with the help of our cook, Fabrice. Here they try their hand (very successfully) at crepes, which were much appreciated by all the boys.



Above: Blast from the past: photos from Spring 2005.



Tanguy Dupont gave a near word-perfect rendition of Victor Hugo's *Les Crapauds* (The Toads.) (7th February Declamation contest.) Judges, Mrs Asch, Mr McDermott and Brother Moylan praised the high standards of memorisation and clarity of diction.

## The College Motto

On the base of statue of Our Lady of the Sceptre in the front yard of the College, there are several sets of wording in lead letters, rather difficult to discern because some of the letters are missing.

One of these gave rise to our motto: *In electis tuis mitte radices* ('put down roots in thine elect.')

It seems that the original wording was: *in electis meis mitte radices*: a request from our Lord to his mother, asking her to look after his chosen ones.

The inspiration of the text could be Isaiah 27, ch 6: "In the coming days Jacob will put down roots, Israel will blossom and bloom, and will fill the face of the earth with fruit."

Wherever it comes from, it is a beautiful prayer. Boys at Chavagnes have chosen to be here, and in a sense God has chosen them too. While they are here, we pray that with the help of grace, they may become rooted and strong in their faith, so that they may go out into the world and bear much fruit.

