‘Of Noble Sentiment and Of Noble Thought’: Burns Clubs and Commemoration in Ireland 1800–1950


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The reception of Robert Burns’s work and legacy in Ireland, particularly in its Northern province of Ulster has been well documented. Less explored is the range of clubs, commemorations and events that exist and have existed throughout Ireland to honour his memory. This essay will explore the foundation and activities of a variety of Burns Clubs and in particular the Belfast Burns Association, one of the longest standing groups within the Burns Federation. While these clubs were mostly situated in the province of Ulster, the essay will argue that the commemoration and celebration of Burns was not confined to the northern province, nor was it merely the preserve of those from an Ulster-Scottish cultural background or indeed those from Scotland, or their descendants residing in Ireland. The essay will trace the early efforts to mark Burns’s significance in Ireland from the early decades of the nineteenth century, chart the widespread engagement in the 1859 Centenary activities across the island and continue into the twentieth century and twenty first centuries where Burns events continued to play a role in Irish civic and cultural life. This survey of commemorative engagement across Ireland pre and post partition will provide an insight into: the role Burns’s legacy played in the shaping of cultural exchange between Ireland and Scotland, the range and variety of civic, cultural and social discourse on Burns’s writing and character in an Irish setting, and how the representation of Burns in the Irish public sphere mirrored and diverged from similar initiatives in Scotland and England.

Robert Burns work provided a powerful literary stimulus to Irish writers. This was particularly apparent in Ulster. Papers flocked to reprint his work, poets saw him as a brither scriever and sought to respond to him, paraphrase him, praise and rebuke him, embroider him into their own work and vie to outdo him in their ambition to seek their own literary status. This was not limited to Ulster. The Ennis born poet, Thomas Dermody affected a Scots response to Burns in his 1792 collection proffered the hand of friendship from Munster:

Hail, brither Rab, thou genuine Bard,  
May laurels be thy grand reward!  
Laurels, with gold, and siller hard, 
To fill the purse,  
For else, they are not worth a card,  
Or Beldame’s curse.

ARCADES AMBO! baith are ready,  
T’invoke, and woo, each tunefu’ Lady,  
But thou, sweet friend, hast got a trade, I,  
Ken no such thing,  
Thou can’st e’en drive the ploughshare steady;  
I can but sing.  

The claim of Arcadian confederacy between Irish poets and people and Burns and Scotland would have a long and varied existence.

**Clubs**

The history of Burns’s Clubs and associations in Ireland have been viewed by certain commentators as a relatively small cultural preoccupation. Analysis of the events at the end of the nineteenth-century has suggested that Burns’s Nights were far from being able to mobilise large numbers of participants.

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While some in late nineteenth-century Belfast may well have sought to vigorously commemor­ate the memory of Burns, they were relatively small in number, and, ultimately, the attendance of fewer than forty middle-class and middle-aged gentlemen at a Burns Night dinner hardly constitutes a pervasive cultural phenomena.⁴

However, if one were to chart the attendance of Burns Night Celebrations into the twenty-first century, one would see the maintenance of a similar number of attendees at the Belfast Burns Night Association.⁵ This continuation of groups and events to commemorate Burns begs several questions of those critics who might want to underplay the long-term connections which Robert Burns and his legacy have had in Ireland. This essay will trace these phenomena in three main ways. Firstly it will examine the history of commemorative events which were held across the island in Burns’s memory. Secondly, It will trace the history and range of clubs pertaining to Burns and examine which were connected to the Burns Federation and which were not The essay will conclude with an examination of the Burns after the nineteenth century and will suggest that while a certain level of diminishment of Burns related events have occurred there has been a continuation of awareness and connection, and at times significant revival of interest in Robert Burns.

There is a possibility that the first event in celebration of Burns to contain a supper was held by the Royal Ayrshire Militia which had formed a Burnsonian Society and may have celebrated Burns Night in Cavan in 1815.⁶

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⁵ The attendance for the Belfast Burns Association Burns Night [2019] was similar to the nineteenth-century event [eyewitness account].
A Burns Club in Belfast appears to have sprung up to celebrate the visit of Robert Burns’s son (Robert Burns) to the city in 1844. The *Freeman’s Journal* reported:

> On Monday night the members of this club entertained Mr. Robert Burns, son of the poet, at supper, in the Burns Tavern. Mr. Archibald Ferguson presided; and Mr. Jas. Grant occupied the vice chair. The cloth having been removed, and the usual loyal toasts drunk. The Chairman said the next toast he had to give was, one which they would receive, and respond to, with all that: respect which the imperishable memory of the bard deserved; he would give them The Memory of Burns.\(^7\)

The celebration of Robert Burns in the province of Ulster needs some more sensible analysis as there is a tendency to fall between two schools of opinion. The first holds to the view that Burns’s works and the Bible were the only reading material in the Ulster homestead. The second that Burns was a Unionist interest that would on occasion present modest celebration to certain sectional groupings. For the former, this view underestimates the variety of responses that northern Irish readers had to Burns which ranged in a spectrum from hagiographic regard to solemn moral, theological and literary dismissal. The latter perspective fails to comprehend the long association that groups and individuals felt with Burns that crossed confessional and political jurisdictions, and which continue well into the twenty-first century.

There remains much work to be done to trace the cultural impact of Burns on Ireland, and the wider impact of Scotland and Ireland upon each nation in the nineteenth century. Events both sides of the North Channel could have unforeseen influences upon the other nation. For instance, the political theatre employed by Daniel O’Connell, full of symbols, demonstrations and energetic follower in Ireland had an impact on the organisers of the 1844 Burns celebration in Ayr. John Wilson sought to ‘create a monster-meeting in the style, pageantry and traditional appeal of the Daniel O’Connell meetings’.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) *Freeman’s Journal* 28 August 1844

This led to an event being staged in Belfast in August 1844 in which members, in imitation of the Scottish events, of Burns family were invited. Belfast newspapers covered this occasion in great dept, the *Belfast Newsletter*, a pro-union paper had been particularly supportive. If the Ayr had been motivated by the manner in which Daniel O’Connell celebrations had been held in Ireland without necessarily descending to sectarian politics, the Belfast event made much more overt statements on theology and identity. By the 1840s in some sections in Ireland Burns had become a feature of proto-Unionist discourse regarding O’Connell, and had featured in the book length retort to O’Connell’s northern tour in the *Repealer Repulsed* in 1841.9 He had been invoked towards the end of the book where a number of satirical pieces, some in Scots, helped to emphasize the points raised from the political speeches against O’Connell. There was a series of faux newspaper correspondence pieces, an intriguing subgenre within Scots language discourse in Ireland, and one purported to have been written by a country dwelling observer. In one of the letters the pandemonium of O’Connell’s oratory was likened to a scene in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’:

DEAR JOHN,— Did ye ever read “Tam o’ Shanter” If sae, ye’ll remember how he saw amang the witches,

“A winnock bunkar i’ the east,
Whaur sat auld Nick in shape o’ beast.
A touzie tyke, black, grim, an’ large,
To gie them music was his charge;
Wha screwed his pipes, and gart them skirl,
Till roof an’ rafters a’ did dirl.”

An’ believe me Johnnie, when I thought o’ Tim Corr an’ the Deil fiddlin’, an’ a’ the folk dancin’ tae the music o’ rebellion,— whilk ye ken is just a ceevil name for robbery and bloodshed,— an’ when I leuked at O’Connell encompassed by lang Bab, an’ auld John, like twa prented picters o’ death upon wires— an’ when I saw a’ the ither clanjamfry mounted wi’ him on the riggin’ o’ a hoose— an’ when I heard him screedin’ up Repeal: but abune a’ when I heard him playin’ till the tune o’ leeberty, equality, toleration an charity—just imported frae Rome; and when I saw the loupin’

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an’ flingin’ o’ the creators he had set a dancin’—I couldna but suspec’ he had borrow’d Tim’s fiddle or Tam’s pipes, sae terrible was the row, an’ the racket he produced.10

The display and tenor of the Ayr event had sought to distance itself from these sorts of debates, Scottish Burns pageantry was unveiled as patriotic, vibrant and above the dictates of narrow party influence. The discussion, that followed in Belfast, also tried to veer away from the national question, and sought to concern itself with debating Burns’s character than worrying about Irish politics. Though in by doing so it articulated a burgeoning trait within Ulster-Scottish discourse and literature, of seeking to outdo Scotland by annunciating their connection with Burns and expatiating upon his perceived faults and failings.

_The Banner of Ulster_, a paper that articulated the position of evangelical Presbyterians in Ireland, had been guarded about his reputation and sought to question his moral probity.11 The _Newsletter_ recounted in great detail the events of the day including a procession and speeches:

> The town of Ayr presented a very animated scene, on the morning of the Festival. Every hotel was crowded to excess, and business was suspended for the day. Although the weather was by no means favourable, and rain poured in torrents in the morning, yet the entire line from Ayr to Kirk Alloway was crowded by fashionable parties going and returning.12

As well as examining Burns’s legacy and character, the Belfast newspapers also took pains to explore another element of Ulster-Scottish relations: how Scotland had treated Robert Burns, with the insinuation that Ireland and been a much better custodian of his legacy than Scotland.

In the weeks after the Ayr festival, Robert Burns Junior travelled to Belfast to visit his widowed daughter Elizabeth. This precipitated two celebratory events. The first of these

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10 _The Repealer Repulsed!: A Correct Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Repeal Invasion of Ulster: Dr. Cooke's Challenge and Mr. O'Connell's Declinature, Tactics, and Flight, with Appropriate Poetical and Pictorial Illustrations, Also, an Authentic Report of the Great Conservative Demonstrations in Belfast, on the 21st and 23rd of January, 1841_ p. 159
11 _Banner Of Ulster_ 9 August 1844
12 _Belfast News-Letter_ 9 August 1844
which took place in the August of 1844 was held in the Burns Tavern in Long Lane in Belfast. It consisted of a series of toasts and songs. The *Belfast Newsletter* reported:

…during the meeting some spirited observations were made on the conduct of a contemporary, for its recent attacks upon the memory of Burns, and its anti-scottish endeavours to depreciate the commemoration festival.13

The second Belfast event was held on the 4th of September in the Donegal Arms Hotel. This was a public gathering and was chaired by the Mayor of Belfast and included significant figures from Belfast Presbyterian circles Rev. Henry Cooke and the publisher William McComb. The mayor, John Clarke, iterated what would become a well-worn dictum in Ulster-Scottish circles:

I have read somewhere, that if you go into the houses of the peasantry in some districts of Scotland, you will very likely find but two books in their possession, one of them the Bible, the other, the poetry of Burns. The same remark is almost literally applicable to the North of Ireland, for you can scarcely enter the house of any farmer there, who has the least pretensions to a library, but you are sure to find in it the poems of Burns, and, I am happy to say the Bible also. Yes, Burns is emphatically the popular poet of Ulster.14

The main speaker, Robert Patterson, a prominent Belfast naturalist and member of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society, spoke eloquently on his admiration for Burns. To him Burns was a poet of sympathy:

It is sympathy, in it’s wildest and most extended sense. It is sympathy with man in his privations and toils, in his anxieties and disappointments—in his hopes and pleasures—in his hours of recreation—and in that which, in his domestic circle, is dedicated to the solemn day of prayer.15

He continued to expound on Burns’s capability of conveying the authentic experience of the Scottish peasantry, and befitting someone whose most recent book was *The Natural History of the Insects Mentioned in Shakespeare's Plays: With Upwards of Eighty Illustrations*.

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13 *Belfast Newsletter* 6 September 1844
14 Ibid
15 Ibid
Patterson praised Burns for putting descriptions of the natural world before the reader ‘in a manner so graphic, that there is no possibility of error’. As well as presenting a sense of the true Scotland and Scottishness being presented to Ireland, speeches also conveyed how Ireland could both appreciate and accommodate Burns in its Hibernian as well as Caledonian proclivities. William McComb, who had contributed to the *Repealer Repulsed* and was seen as the most significant Presbyterian publisher in Belfast, provided a celebratory poem that contained phrases in Irish as well as Scots and concluded each verse with ‘Ireland mavourneen, erin go bragh’ (Ireland my darling, Ireland, forever/ till the end of time).

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With the harp of our country in heartfelt emotion,
We hail thee, the son of the father of song,
Who lifted his voice like the sound of the ocean,
To sing of the Bruce, the avenger of wrong!
First-born of the Bard,—high-born of the Muses,—
We asked thee to come and thou didst not refuse us;
Then Cead mille failte, no hand can unloose us:
Erin mavourneen—Erin go bragh!
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McComb may have been alluding to the writing of another Scottish-born poet Thomas Campbell, whose ballad, ‘The Exile of Erin’ also contained the phrase. Connections with the rest of Ireland were further intimated by Professor John Stevelly, who was the Professor for Natural History at the Belfast Academical Institution. A native of Cork, and not to be outdone by his northern compatriots he remarked to the audience, that Burns’s works were known in the libraries of the literate in his county, while conceding that the peasant boys of Kerry were restricted to reciting Horace and other Latin works as they went about their business. The event stressed the cross community and island-wide nature of the assembly, perceiving Burns’s memory as reaching out to all creeds, classes and persuasions in Belfast.

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17 https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/view/?id=15100; see also https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=79420 for a discussion on a number of Scottish and Irish songs which use this phrase.
In 1846, Belfast witnessed another Burns event when there was an exhibition of ‘the furniture and other valuable relics, from the cottage near Alloway Kirk, Ayrshire, where Robert Burns the celebrated Scottish poet was born’. It was further reported by the *Belfast NewsLetter* that:

The tables are so cut and carved by pilgrims to the ‘Banks and braes of bonny Doon,’ that there is scarcely room for a pin to lie without touching them. Some patient parties who have taken the trouble, have counted as many as twenty-five thousand names and initials.\(^\text{18}\)

The Robert Burns Centenary celebrations of 1859 in Ulster have been discussed by previous work, but it is worth exploring this again, and extending this record to examine how Burns was celebrated outside of the province of Ulster.\(^\text{19}\) In the ‘official’ documentation of the events, Ireland held 10 of the global total of 872.\(^\text{20}\) While this is not necessarily that grand a tally, the fact that it was mentioned demonstrates some level of appreciation of the Irish celebrations and the book does go on to specify in the other events where Ireland was either mentioned in toasts, or represented by attendees.\(^\text{21}\) In Ireland, events were held in Armagh, Belfast, Dublin, Dundalk, Gort, Limerick, Newry, and Tralee. Some of the events in Armagh and Gort were briefly recounted, while Belfast (eleven and a half pages), Dublin (five pages) went into considerable detail. For example, in Gort, County Galway:

Mr. Andrew Wallace, Gort, in honour of Scotland's immortal Bard, invited all his Scotch friends, and a few Irish ones, residing in that handsome little town and neighbourhood, to a private entertainment in his own house.\(^\text{22}\)

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\(^\text{18}\) *Belfast News-Letter* 16 January 1846.

\(^\text{19}\) Frank Ferguson, John Erskine, Roger Dixon ‘Commemorating and Collecting Burns in the north of Ireland 1844-1902 in Ferguson and Holmes, *Burns and Ulster*, pp 127-144.


\(^\text{21}\) Ireland is mentioned 56 times in the book.

\(^\text{22}\) Ibid P.509
In contrast, Belfast held two sizeable gatherings at the Music Hall and at the Corn Exchange. There was considerable reportage surrounding the commemoration in the Belfast and northern papers. There was a tendency in the past to view these kind of events as representing different theology viewpoints within the Ulster-Scottish spectrum. It might also be argued that it indicates a split within the Queen’s College Belfast and the intellectual, social, political and aesthetic differences among its faculty. The banquet at the Music Hall hosted 250 men and a further 80 women seated in the balcony. Guest of honour was Robert Burns’s granddaughter Mrs Elizabeth Everett, who had settled in Belfast. Much to the dismay of the followers of the temperance movement, alcohol was served. Not all of the speeches were necessarily to the taste of the organisers who had sought to emphasize Belfast’s connection with Burns. Professor George Lillie Craik, Professor of English Literature and History, Queen’s College Belfast (1798–1866) using some deft oratory simultaneously reaffirmed Scotland’s ownership of Burns and the Scottishness of Ireland:

But Burns, it may be said, belongs to Scotland, and we are in Ireland. This is not Edinburgh or Glasgow, but Belfast. It is true that Burns belongs to Scotland, and not to Ireland; but besides that, many of us now present are also Scotsmen by birth, and can only claim the honour of being Irish by adoption, or by sufferance; it might also be a matter of question whether this Ulster of ours be not really more a part of Scotland than a part of Ireland. My Scotch fellow-countrymen, indeed, have all along been in the habit of acting in reference to Ireland almost as if they held the whole island to be, in some sort, their own.

This event drew condemnation from some letter writers in the Belfast papers who saw the serving of alcohol somewhat problematic. There were also charges that speakers had been told what to say.

The Corn Exchange soiree was even larger than the Music Hall festivities. If the Music Hall had catered for a more middle class and socially prestigious clientele espousing Burns as the epitome of the Imperial Caledonian values: the Corn Exchange was avowedly more working class in its attendance. There Burns was celebrated, by a selection of speakers who were mostly clergymen and Professors from Queen’s College Belfast, who sought to propound the Scottish descent of many in Ulster and focus on Burns as a paragon of respectable working-class values. Dr James McCosh, Professor of Logic and Metaphysics, used the platform to underscore his Covenanter heritage by claiming that he refused to attend the other main Burns’s evening because of the manner in which speeches would have to follow the dictates of the organisers. He continued:

The committee for the management of another centenary celebration of Burns’ birthday had done him (Dr. McCosh) the honour of nominating him to a place in connection with their proceedings. He preferred, however, on this occasion mingling with the common people. Burns was, emphatically, one of the people; and, if a second Robert Burns—a young Burns—were to be found, it would be in this company rather than in the other.

The evening was concluded by Reverend Hugh Hanna, who would later gain notoriety for his anti-Catholic speeches, though on this occasion he was more restrained and did not stray into contestation.

The Dublin event was conducted in a similar level of social prestige as Belfast’s Music Hall evening. Presided over by the Lord Mayor, it was held in the Ancient Concert Rooms.

Dublin. Samuel Ferguson, the Belfast-born poet and antiquarian, led the speeches;

In calling upon me to give the toast I am about to propose, you do me an honour which I prize the more because I am hardly worthy of it; yet I may, without vanity, acknowledge that on this occasion, when you celebrate the memory of the great Scottish poet in the metropolis of Ireland, there is a certain propriety in your

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26 Ibid 503-4.

devolving that honourable task on one like me, who, although, by the nativity of many generations, an Irishman, am yet, by lineage and descent, a Scot.28

Also in attendance was Mr Gilbert Burns, a relative, who brought with him some artefacts pertaining to the family, which he claimed included:

The most interesting of these relics is the family Bible of Burns' father and mother, containing a record of the births of their children. I have before me a well-executed facsimile of that record, and on the same sheet a facsimile of Bruce's Address from a manuscript in the poet's handwriting in my possession.29

A second dinner event was held in St Jude’s Royal Hotel, Grafton Street in which over 150 attended. Unlike the fraught nature of the Belfast meetings which practically met in opposition to each other, a deputation from the Concert Rooms attended the Grafton Street gathering and were met with great approbation.

By contrast, the 1896 centenary celebrations, were slightly muted in contrast and tended to be held under the auspices of The Belfast Burns Association and the Benevolent Society of St Andrews in Belfast and Dublin respectively. Other considerations in Ireland were proving more insistent than Ayrshire’s Bard. And other events on the night of the 25th of January were competing in Belfast such as the meetings of the Independent Order of Foresters and the Conversazione [Presbyterian] Theological Society.30

Burns Clubs and Associations.

The Belfast Burns Association was officially founded in 1872 and later affiliated to the Burns Federation in 1886 when it was given the number 15.31 Previously, Burns-linked activities had been organised by the Belfast Benevolent Society of St Andrew or had been events to mark special commemorations. The St Andrews Society had been established in 1867 as a

28 Ballentine, Chronicle, p504.
29 Ibid, p. 507.
30 Belfast Newsletter, 25 Jan 1896.
31 The Belfast Burns Association was instituted in 1886; federated 1886 and had approximately 250 members.
charitable organisation to assist Scots, or their dependents in the Belfast area who had fallen on difficult times. Since the nineteenth century onwards the fortunes of Burns clubs have been mixed. In the north today, the Belfast Burns Association is the only remaining Burns Federated Club. It continues to meet, though its reach and influence is perhaps not what it was in the first half of the twentieth century. It was by no means the only Burns club operating in the province. In the 1980s Belfast had been able to accommodate a second Burns Club, the Harland and Wolff Burns Club. It was federated to the Robert Burns World Federation in 1981, given the club number No.1010 and survived into the 1990s. Its first Burns Supper was held in 1982 and it boasted over 100 members present at each Burns Supper. The Belfast shipyard Harland and Wolff Shipyard had an unusual connection with Burns. Highland Mary’s remains were found in an area of land owned by the shipbuilders. Ultimately, it was decided that her remains would be moved. However, Lord Pirrie (chairman of Harland and Wolff) donated a large sum of money to the Burns Federation to fund a memorial to Burns and Mary which was unveiled in May 1922 at Failford Hill - the last meeting place of the young lovers. At the base of the memorial it is inscribed, ‘This stone was erected by the Burns Federation with money kindly donated by Harland & Wolff Shipyards’.

Larne Burns Club (1902-1908)

In Larne, County Antrim, The Larne Burns Club had been founded around the turn of the century and held a number of events in the early decades of the twentieth century. This was during a period of hiatus for the Belfast Burns Club.

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The club met in the Kings’ Arms Hotel, Larne. Perhaps the most prominent member of this association, was William Clarke Robinson who was a professor of Greek with a distinguished career who studied with a German Kaiser. Newspaper articles indicate that the Club folded due to a couple of factors: its success made it difficult to manage; and the death of its President left it hard to find as able a replacement. It never sought connection to the Burns Federation and this, with the exception of Belfast and Dublin indicates, indicates a structural weakness within many Burns clubs in Ireland. Without the support that might have been proffered by the affiliation, the Irish clubs were dependent upon finding guidance and development from within their own ranks. This was fine when membership, cohesion and enthusiasm waxed, but when these factors waned they were liable to disappear quickly.

A second Larne Burns Club was founded in the 1920s, the Townparks Tam O’ Shanter Burns Club (1923-1927/8?). It held its first Burns Supper in 1924 and met in several locations throughout Larne and seems to have been linked to the Larne Literary and Debating Society. This club seemed to place an interest in the importance of the relationship between Burns and Jean Armour. Like their other Larne predecessor, they never affiliated to the Robert Burns World Federation.

A third Larne based club sprung up in the late 1970s—the East Antrim Burns Association (1979-1993). This was federated to the Robert Burns Word Federation in 1983 and given the club number No. 1018. It held Burns Suppers in the Highways Hotel, Larne and articles in the *East Antrim and Larne Times* suggest that it was a relatively popular affair in the period between 1980 and 1993.

Derry-Londonderry

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In Derry-Londonderry the Londonderry Burns Club and Caledonian Society was founded in 1907 and was active until the late 1960s. One of the last times the club was mentioned was in a Belfast Telegraph article in 1968 that bemoaned that tinned haggis would have to be served at suppers in the province that year due to the restrictions incurred by the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak. There are indications that this may have grown out of another club or society as the Londonderry Sentinel had reported a club in the city in 1889.

The objectives of the Society were given as follows:

The objects of the Society shall be to cherish the memory of Burns; to study his works; to discuss poets and poetry in general; to endeavour by these means, or in such other manner as may be approved, to cultivate a closer social union amongst all classes of Scotsmen and other sympathisers with the objects of the Club in Londonderry and neighbourhood; 10 provide a fund, by annual subscription and entry fees, whereby Scotsmen in poor and necessitous circumstances may be relieved.

It joined the Robert Burns World Federation in 1909. The Londonderry Sentinel reported on its activities in the lifetime of the group and highlighted its social and charitable functions.

Dublin Burns Celebrations

The St Andrew’s Benevolent Society in Dublin was the focus (and remains the focus) for Burns festivities in the city. It outlines its continuing interest in hosting a Burns Night in the following manner:

Burn's night has become famous the world over for celebrating the life and works of Rabbie Burns. It is celebrated on or near the poets birthday 25th January. The Dublin Scottish Society follow the traditional form of a Burns supper with various speakers providing the various addresses, the Immortal Memory and so on. A fantastic evening

34 Belfast Telegraph 18 January 1968.
35 Londonderry Sentinel 26 January 1889.
36 Burns Federation, Annual Burns Chronicle and Club Directory, 1910, XIX, (J Maxwell and Sons, Dumfries) P.178
37 https://www.dublinscottish.com/ accessed 06/06/23
for anyone with a Scottish connection or interest in Burns. All monies raised are
donated to the selected charity.  

An account of the eight annual dinner gives a strong indication of these events as a means for
Scots living in the city to affirm their Scottish identity and their loyalty to the Crown and
Empire in ways that were convivial and non-sectarian:

The eighth annual dinner of the Dublin Burns Club was held in the Aberdeen Hall of
the Gresham Hotel last night, when large company sat down under the genial
Chairmanship of Mr. Richard Jones, J.P., President the club. and the evening was
enjoyed in truly Scottish fashion by those present, there being many guests to partake
of the characteristically Scottish hospitality that was shown. The dinner was
excellently served, the approach of the haggis being heralded by skirl the bagpipes,
and the tasty Scottish dish was paraded round the room by the waiters in procession
the tune of a stirring highland march on the pipes. After the dinner, the loyal toasts
were honoured on the call the Chairman, who, in giving the toast of “The King,”
referred, amidst applause, to the visit paid by his Majesty and his gracious Consort
Ireland during the summer, and observed that the Irish people recognised the Kingly
compliment paid to them his Majesty that occasion.

Louth

Dundalk, in County Louth, has a long association with Burns due to the fact that Agnes
Burns, Robert Burns sister, resided in Stephenstown, near the town, with her husband
William Gault. Dundalk appears to have had its own Burns Club, which had helped
renovate a memorial at the start of the twentieth century. There were strong ties between
Dundalk and the Belfast Burns Club who had helped with further renovations in the 1930s
and continue to work with Stephenstown today.

Looking at the commemoration of Burns in Ireland today there are three patterns which
emerge. There is the maintenance of affiliated Burns Clubs, through the Belfast Burns
Association and the St Andrews Benevolent Society, though the numbers of active members

38 Ibid.
39 Irish Times 30 October 1905.
40 Noel Ross ‘Burns’ Associations with County Louth’, Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical
and local interest that both groups engendered may not be a significant as their nineteenth century predecessors. Secondly, there continues to be a celebration of Burns at local level in the north of Ireland through a variety of groups though none would claim or wish to seek affiliation to the Burns Federation. Thirdly, there did appear to be a general movement towards the diminishment of interest in Robert Burns until the aftermath of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement that helped instigate the foundation of the Ulster-Scots Agency and other bodies such as the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund. These groups as well as lobbying from the Ulster-Scots Language Society and others have seen the placement of public facing events, performances and television and digital programming that seek to re-establish Burns’s memory in Belfast and beyond. For example, in 2017, the Agency organised a range of events across a week in January in Belfast that included a series of public talks and performances that included a concert by the Ulster Orchestra at the Waterfront Hall. These events suggested that there was similar engagement with Burns in Belfast that appeared to equal the interest of the nineteenth century. Whether these activities will lessen the general drift into a social forgetting of Burns, it is too early to speculate— but the amount of investment in, the range of events and variety of activities that celebrate Burns today suggest that, outside of Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland in particular, still remembers.

42 Belfast Live 24 January 2017 https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/ulster-scots-agency-hosting-week-12478542 accessed 06/06/23