1. National Bard

**Scotland's national poet Robert Burns is recognised the world over for his work focusing on universal themes of love and nature.**

He has a national day named after him on the 25th January each year. Burns suppers are celebrated on this day with traditional dishes of haggis and whisky and recitals of his best-loved work. At New Year all over the world, his poem 'Auld Lang Syne', a sincere expression of friendship is sung. His face has featured on banknotes and his books have been translated into over forty languages.

Although he died over 200 years ago in 1796, why has Burns become a poster boy for the Scottish identity and why is he more popular than ever today?

2. Burns' life

**So who is this national bard? He was a farmer's son who could speak to the common man. His life growing up among the ordinary people of Scotland meant he could write about nature and hardship as well as love and family. He also led a colourful and varied life which exposed him to different sections of society.**

He was born in a small town in Ayrshire in 1759, the son of a tenant farmer. He was well-read and was educated both at school and at home. He began writing while working on his father's farm and his first works were songs declaring his love to local girls.

Burns' first collection of poetry, 'Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect', was published in 1786 and includes favourite 'To A Mouse'. It became known as the 'Kilmarnock Edition' after the town in which it was published and all copies were sold within a few weeks.

Burns had been planning to emigrate to Jamaica but, encouraged by the success of his book, he stayed in Scotland where he took the Scottish literary world by storm. He published a second edition of his poems but his popularity did not make him wealthy. He liked a drink and due to his lifestyle, the money made from writing did not last long.

By 1787, he was working as a farmer again and in 1788, despite his increasingly radical views, he took a job in the Excise Service. The hard work this job entailed and his dissolute lifestyle took their toll on Burns' health and he died on 21 July 1796 aged 37 on the day his son Maxwell was born.

3. The Ploughman poet

**The main reason Burns is so popular today is because of the themes and language of everyday life that he used. His poems were humorous and he used small subjects to express big ideas.**

This can be seen in poems like 'To a Mouse', as he draws a comparison between the lives of mice and men. In 'Tam o' Shanter, he suggests that the drunken protagonist who's chased by witches should have heeded his wife's advice and gone home instead of going drinking. In 'To a Louse', he highlights how useful it would be for us to have the power to see ourselves as others see us when he pokes fun at the posh lady in church with a louse on her hat.

Burns was a champion of the Scots language at a time when it was not popular in literary circles. It is through his work that we are still exposed to Scots. By writing in the vernacular, he paved the way for Scottish writers like James Kelman, James Robertson and Irvine Welsh to do the same today.

4. Burns and womenational Trust for Scotland

**Burns has also left a long legacy of romantic poetry that is still sung and recited today. This was partly because he was a ladies' man. He had eight children with his wife Jean Armour and four children with other women.**

However he wasn’t always the rogue that he seemed. He was influenced by the female writers of the time such as Mary Wollstonecraft who said women were entitled to education and a place in society. This gave him a respect for women which is evident in his works and relationships. He had friendships with women such as Mrs Dunlop and Agnes McLehose who were both close confidantes.

When his relationship with Agnes McLehose finished he wrote ‘Ae Fond Kiss’. This has become one of his most enduring songs performed by people such as the actor Alex Norton and singers such as Eddi Reader as it so movingly expresses his sadness at the end of their relationship.

At the Burns supper itself, there is ‘The Toast to the Lassies’. One of the responses is ‘Green Grow the Rashes’ which shows Burns’ respect for women. The poem says that although Mother Nature created men first she perfected the process with women.

5. Lyrical poet

**Burns wasn't just known for his poems. He was also a prolific song writer and we often remember songs more easily than we do poems. He adapted the words of old Scottish folk songs and contributed over 300 songs to the Scots Musical Museum.**

One of his most famous poems was 'Auld Lyne Syne' which is set to the music of a traditional folk song. This song is now sung all over the world to herald the New Year and is taken to mean 'long, long ago' or 'days gone by'.

In terms of songwriting ability, he is perhaps the nearest thing Scotland has to Lennon and McCartney. Bob Dylan cites 'My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose' as his greatest lyrical inspiration.

Burns was also musical himself and played the violin, the guitar and the stock and horn. There is also strong evidence that he could read music.

6. Burns and modern day culture/CORBIS

John Steinbeck was one of many authors who were influenced by Burns long after his death.

**His work has even influenced 20th Century American authors. JD Salinger's book ‘Catcher in the Rye’ references the song 'Comin' thro' the Rye' and John Steinbeck’s novel ‘Of Mice and Men’ is named after a line in the poem 'To a Mouse'.**

It is Burns' ability to empathise with the human condition that make him a universally loved poet and songwriter and an important cultural figure over 200 years after his death.

Burns is often mythologised in Scottish life and literary circles especially at the time of year when Burns suppers are held across the country. But what is interesting about him is that he was a farmer's son with a dubious reputation, both as a womaniser and later as an exciseman, who had a way with words which ultimately became his legacy.