



Robert (Bob) Carnie and the Calgary Burns Club



Written by Tony Grace for the Carnie Group of the Calgary Burns Club.
November 2020

It is my distinct honour and pleasure to re-introduce **Professor Robert (Bob) Carnie** to the members of the **Calgary Burns Club** – especially those members who never had the good fortune to know him or to listen to him speak on his favourite subject – Robert Burns. I must include myself in the latter category as although I did meet him, I never heard him make a presentation, something I regret to this day. As a Burnsian Bob was a giant, and **The Calgary Burns Club** was extremely fortunate to have had him as a member and to have benefited in so many ways from his knowledge and his ability to pass on that knowledge to anyone willing to listen.

Bob was born in Dundee in 1928, being educated at the **Morgan Academy**, followed by **St. Andrews University** where he earned a doctorate in English Literature in 1954. He went on to teach at **Bedford College** at the **University of London**, **St. Andrews University**, and then the **University of Ife in Nigeria** before returning to Scotland in 1965 to become the English Department Head at the recently created **University of Dundee**. In 1968 he became a full professor at the **University of Calgary** where he remained for twenty years before retiring in 1988 with the title of Professor Emeritus. In January of 1983 Bob was proposed to be a member of the **Calgary Burns Club** by Graham Underwood and seconded by Jack Whyte.

Bob immediately became an active member of the Club, regularly attending meetings and contributing to the fellowship at the end of all the meetings as all the members did in the early days of the Club. Then in May 1985 Bob proposed that to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Club it should purchase copies of the Robert Burns Bicentennial facsimile of the Kilmarnock Edition. However by March 1986 this proposal had changed and grown to a proposal for the Club to produce its own facsimile Edition which would not only mark the tenth anniversary of the Club but the two hundredth anniversary of the publication of the original Kilmarnock Edition. Bob managed this project that saw two hundred copies of the facsimiles produced, with one hundred and eighty sold by subscription in advance (just as had happened with the original Kilmarnock Edition), and with a further twenty copies available to the Club for future use such as gifts for speakers etc. Bob prepared a booklet to be included in the buckram box made especially for each facsimile copy, that told the story of the Kilmarnock Edition as it was originally published, as well as explaining how the facsimile by **The Calgary Burns Club** had come about. The facsimile was printed on hand-made paper manufactured in Montreal, sewn and printed in Calgary, with blue paper wrappers with the edges of the leaves untrimmed. Included in the booklet was a complete list of the subscribers.

In 1985 Bob was elected Junior Vice president of the Club, becoming President two years later in May 1987. Bob attempted to develop “**A Guide Book to Burns Studies**” at this point, and although funds were committed and research started, it eventually ran out of steam as support from both inside and outside the Club wavered. During his time as President the Club considered offering to host the World Federation’s annual Conference in 1991, but these things are long in gestation and it was not until December of 1988 that the Federation agreed that the 1993 Conference would be held in Calgary. The next few years were spent in planning in detail all the arrangements for the Conference which eventually was held in July of that year and allowed attendees to take in some of the activities of the Calgary Stampede. Bob was heavily involved in at least two of the main events at the Conference. He organized a symposium on July 19th 1993 at which seven papers were presented by distinguished Burnsians from around the Burns’ world and published in “**The Life and Works of Robert Burns; Twentieth Century Perspectives.**” Bob also curated a **Book Display** at the University of Calgary of some fifty books primarily associated with Burns, but including a few relevant to other poets and Scotland in general. During this time Bob had been appointed Club Bard a position he filled with distinction for many years.

It was during the planning stage for the Conference that Bob was awarded the **W. Ormiston Roy Memorial Fellowship** at the **University of South Carolina**, which enabled him to conduct research in the **G. Ross Roy Collection of Burnsiana & Scottish Literature**. His research was aimed at writing a book on **Victorian and**

Edwardian Burns. Bob was only the second person to be awarded this fellowship, which has since seen many well-known Burnsian names honoured over the years, and is still operative today.

The Calgary Burns Club was not the only organization that Bob was involved with. In 1990, a small group, recognizing that the Burns' world included both sexes, founded **The Schiehallion Scottish Heritage Society** which was open to both women and men. Bob and his wife Jean were among the co-founders and the new Society was to receive the same attention and support that Bob had unstintingly given to **The Calgary Burns Club**. Regular attendance at meetings and participation at their January dinners became the norm and in 1996 the Society published **Burns 200: A Guide for Burnsians** compiled and annotated by Bob Carnie. This listed **200 Items Central to the Study of Robert Burns**, and I wonder if it wasn't the eventual format of the lost **A Guide Book to Burns Studies**, originally started by **The Calgary Burns Club** in 1987.

What was it that made Bob so beloved by the Members of both **The Calgary Burns Club** and **The Schiehallion Scottish Heritage Society**? He was a faithful and regular attendee at meetings and always actively participated in the activities of all those meetings. Looking at the "Fellowship Programs" of those meetings, many of which we still have, he was the most frequent presenter while a Member, and was always ready at the last minute to present a paper or talk about a subject, to complete an otherwise incomplete evening. In his presentations he had an easy delivery and spoke in warm tones that made listening pleasurable, all with a twinkle in his eye that bespoke his sense of humour; and because of his training and experience he spoke with authority which was accepted by his audience. He was able to impart interesting facts in an interesting and informative manner, and above all things he had a dignified and modest mien.

In 1995 the Executive Committee proposed to honour Distinguished Members of **The Calgary Burns Club**, which would be done by the awarding of a special plaque to be presented at the Ladies Night function; it was agreed that there would likely not be a candidate every year for this recognition. There was no contest as to who would be the first such Distinguished Member to be recognized, and Bob Carnie was proposed by Don McWilliam and seconded by Stuart Chalmers, with the motion passed unanimously: then on February 18th 1995 at Ladies Night, Bob was appropriately recognized by being presented with his plaque. I can find no evidence that any other Members were honoured in this way in subsequent years, and it is worth noting that the plaque presented to Bob is identical to the ones used to honour Past Presidents today.

The original Constitution and Bylaws defined the term Life Member, but there does not appear to have been anyone selected by the Executive for that honour until 1994. In the Membership List of October 1994 for the first time the Members were classified as Life Members, Members and Associate Members. The Life Members are shown as Alisdair Ross, Graham Underwood, Bob Watson, John Whitelock, Jack Whyte and Grant MacEwan, who was the Club Patron at that time. The other five people listed were the only Founder-members of the Club who were still with the Club in 1994. By November 1998 three other Members had been appointed as Life Members; Bob Carnie, Tommy Miller and Andy Hay. Once again Bob was among the first Members to be granted Life Membership for his contributions to the Club.

To celebrate the twenty fifth anniversary of the Club, Bob proposed to the Executive Committee in February 1999, that he would author another book to be called "**Robert Burns; the Poems and Songs Illustrated 1796-1930. A Survey.**" A small committee to help Bob was appointed and the project continued to be developed and by the end of the year three hundred copies of **Burns Illustrated; A Short Study of Selected Illustrations (1795 – 1925) of The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns**; had been authorized, issued in a protective a slip case, and each copy included a full coloured, separately numbered print by the Scottish artist J. E. Christie. The book was received with acclaim from Burnsians and others around the world, with over two hundred copies pre-sold and

more sold immediately following publication. At this point in time the Club still has about thirty copies available for sale, and annually gives a copy to the main speaker at our January Dinner.

In mid-2001 Bob became ill and would be dogged by ill-health for the rest of his life. Unfortunately his illness resulted in his withdrawal from his active participation in both **The Calgary Burns Club** and **The Schiehallion Scottish Heritage Society**, at both of which he was sorely missed. His knowledge, his comments and observations as well as his humour in the meetings and activities of both Clubs was noticeably lacking. He passed on September 8th 2007 after battling his illness for several years. The following month Ron Budd proposed that **The Calgary Burns Club** *“form a group to study, ramble through, think about or whatever, the topic of Scottish literature, both prose and poetry.... to be called **The Calgary Burns Club Robert Carnie Scottish Literature Group**, or, for short, **The Carnie Group**.”* I would like to believe that since that time **The Carnie Group** has served the Club well both by entertaining as well as educating the members, and has helped keep the memory and legacy of **Bob Carnie** alive and well.