



Mr. President, Your Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen ... and others

I have been coming to the Burns Supper for some years now, and have always enjoyed its rich ceremony and ritual – watching the Haggis being piped to the table, hearing the blood-curdling Address to it. And yes, even eating it, together with delicious nips and tatties. Until now, I have enjoyed a comfortable arrangement with the organizing committee – I have been required to pay at the entrance, and then my duties were to eat, drink and listen. This year our luck ran out: I will now address you on the topic of Switzerland for the next 10 minutes. I propose to relate to you a Swiss fantasy tale concerning Rabbie Burns.

Many of us here have left our county of birth, exchanging our familiar family, friends, language & culture - to settle in a foreign land. This for many and varied reasons. Rabbie Burns himself contemplated emigration in 1786 to seek his fortune. Penniless after an attempt at flax growing, he booked passage on a ship from Leith bound for Jamaica. Much to the relief of later generations of Scots, **Caledon-ophiles** and Haggis-lovers the world over, he chose to stay.

We have heard some of Burns' rousing and best-known works already tonight. Somewhat less familiar to you may be a song, which he wrote about the daughter of William Stewart, factor of the Closeburn estate. As an Excise officer, Burns frequently visited with him while on Customs business, and wrote *You're welcome, Willie Stewart* about him. Burns' attention inevitably turned to Willie's daughter – he wrote for her the song *Lovely Polly Stewart*. Now, Polly led an erratic life. She married her cousin, by whom she had 3 sons. After he absconded, she lived with the farmer George Welsh. They could not agree and separated. She finally formed another association with a Swiss soldier called **Fleitz**, with whom she went abroad. She was probably unaware that many years later, speakers at Burns Suppers would be grateful for this slim Swiss poetic connection. Here is the chorus from Burns' short song about Polly Stewart:

**O lovely Polly Stewart,
O charming Polly Stewart,
There's ne'er a flower that blooms in May,
That's half so fair as thou art!**

Now, in a flight of fancy, I wondered how this song might have come to be written, if Burns **had** taken ship in 1786, bound not for Jamaica, but instead by way of France for Berne at the time of Pestalozzi.

I fancy that Burns traveled post-haste through pre-Revolutionary France towards Basel, and thence with the weekly carriage to Berne. Helvetic – the national coaching line that had arisen on a new solid financial base from the ashes of its predecessor, Helvetic Coaches and the taxes of the Citizens –operated the carriage. Helvetic Coaches had gone disastrously bankrupt the previous year, 1785, due to an unprecedented downturn in travel occasioned by the revolting peasants in neighboring France. Matters had also not been helped by the closure of routes through Southern Germany, following complaints from residents about the excessive noise of galloping horses. Arriving at Berne, Burns presented



himself at the Old Federal Aliens' Office, stated his name as **Röbu Brunner** and applied for a resident's permit. Rigorous medical testing followed in order to ensure that he carried neither Tuberculosis, the Pox, nor any other pestilent diseases injurious to the good Citizens of Berne. Then followed his social instruction, in which he learned important skills such as how properly gleaming to leave the washhouse as he found it after his assigned monthly washday. He struggled to learn how to tie the perfect knot around his waste parchment to be laid out for collection. He began to separate his rubbish. He shook hands more frequently, and remembered peoples' names. He learned the importance of silence on Sundays, and how to ignore the repeated twangs and thuds from the many nearby crossbow ranges. He learned, in short, the meaning of **Ordnung**.

Being a literary man, and already familiar with another throat-challenging language, **Brunner** rapidly learned Swiss German. He was quick to see its advantages in poetic terms of the full freedom offered in spelling and grammar, and the extraordinary syllabic compression possible. Instead of having to fit a difficult *I beg your pardon, could you please repeat what you said* into a metered line of poetry, he could neatly insert the **Bärendüütsch** compressed form of **Hä**.

Brunner settled in the small small village of Muri, some distance outside the city – the **Gemeinde** being in budget surplus, and paying back the excess of taxes to its inhabitants. He found employment nearby as a Ferryman at the **Auguet** crossing on the River **Aare**. This afforded him ample time to compose poetry and songs. He continued to write in Scots dialect and English, but naturally also now in his newly adopted language, **Bärendüütsch**:

The titles of some of his published works from this period reflect his experiences: in 1786 soon after he had applied for residence in Berne, the plaintive: **Würlich, i wöt inne**. The angry diatribe from 1788 against non-paying ferry passengers: **Du muesch zahle, du Bschisscheib**. He joined a local sports club, but quit after being hit by a flying nut, recording the experience in the poem **Death and Dr Hornnuss**. Brunner's verse describing the emerging Swiss Banking industry included **Lines written on a 10-Franc Note** and a tribute to his local bank manager in **The Banks O' Thun**. Naturally, Brunner's interest in the fair sex did not desert him in Switzerland, as evidenced by **Verses intended to be Written below a Lady's Bodice** and the lusty song **Heidi lass, Cock up your Beaver**.

His later poetry included his epic poem on William Tell's bravery at the Höhle Gasse: **Try that for size, Mr. Gessler**, and, in reference to the unfamiliar Swiss rubbish habits he had experienced: **Ladies, lock yer dustbins**. Towards the end of his life, he wrote a nostalgic lament that Haggis does not travel well: **Né danke, I wot numme mehr Fondue inebig**

In this fantasy world, certain things would have turned out differently today. The **Brunner's Abigsässe** would now be celebrated by Swiss all around the globe. It would be a traditional menu of Cheese Fondue, lovingly prepared with fresh garlic rubbed inside the pan, and slowly stirred to perfection in figures of 8. A burly waist-coated figure playing the **Käsechilbi** on the **Schwyzzerorgeli** would escort it to table. Brunner's famous *Stirring Address to a Fondue* would be recited:



**Stirred slowly, no curdles on your face
 Great Hauptmann of the chees-ed race
 Above them all you take your place
 Beef, tripe or Haggis
 Don't lose your bread
 You'll have to pay
 E guete z'same, I'd like to say**

The toasts would include *Hail Helvetica* and *Merci Vieumau, Schottland*. Indeed, it would be a different celebration to the one which we are enjoying here tonight.

Brunner's best-known work was a love song, written after he met Polly Stewart again in Berne. I offer to you now this lyrical fantasy version in a somewhat mangled version of that language of poets and minstrels, **Bärndütsch**

**Gruessech, lieblichs Polly Stewart,
 Ä ü ä! - charmati Polly Stewart,
 Ds'edelste Bluemli wo blüeht im Mai
 isch numma halb so schön wie Du!**

**D'Blueme blüeht, verblühet, kheit abe
 Che Chunscht cha si wieder erneuere
 Aber ewigi Jugend wäge Diine inneri Wärte
 Isch Dir g'schenkt gsi, liebs Polly Stewart**

**Soll dä wo Di i'd Arme schliest
 Es treus u ergäbes Härze ha
 Er söt so g'schid si um chlar z'wüsse
 dass d'r Himmu ligt in Polly z'küsse**

History did not, however, happen that way - Rabbie Burns did not choose to emigrate, and stayed at Edinburgh in 1786 to become an Excise man, a farmer and Scotland's national poet and vagabond. Switzerland's pain was Scotland's gain.

Despite this terrible loss, Switzerland has extended a warm welcome to us. It offers to us a stable and prosperous place in which to live and rear our families, and build new & warm circles of friendship. Should we choose to naturalize, Switzerland offers arguably the most inclusive form of democracy today. Here we can find great natural beauty, for summer and winter pleasure. In the geographic heart of Europe, and polyglot, Switzerland offers us unrivalled opportunities for travel and culture. And, thankfully, we can still eat Haggis at the Burns Supper, keeping Fondue for those magical winter ski evenings.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen, please be upstanding as I give you the Toast to our Host Country, Switzerland.