25th January 2026

Portrait

"To produce a portrait is to do much more than make a mere study of a head."

Frank Fowler, *Portrait (1894)*

Today is Burns' Night in Scotland, and a day on which the immortal memory of our National Poet is toasted all over the world. With word and song, haggis and whisky, sentimentality and national pride, Robert Burns will be rightly praised. But today, I'm not going to give myself to Burns' love poems, nor his verses on politics, religion or social justice. Instead, I'll focus on a little-read poem, which takes us into the depths of Burns' soul. For this poem is Burns' autobiography, a man who knew himself, and knew what he wanted others to know too. The poem is *Contented wi' little and cantie wi' mair.*

Contented wi' little and cantie wi' mair,	*cantie=joyful*
Whene'er I forgather wi' Sorrow and Care,	
I gie them a skelp, as they're creepin alang,	*skelp=smack*
Wi' a cog o' guid swats and an auld Scottish sang.	*cog=cup; swats=ale*
I whyles claw the elbow o' troublesome Thought;	*claw=clasp*
But Man is a soger, and Life is a faught.	*soger=soldier; fought=fight*
My mirth and guid humour are coin in my pouch,	
And my Freedom's my lairdship nae monarch daur touch.	*daur=dare*
A towmond o' trouble, should that be my fa',	*towmound=twelvemonth*
A night o' guid fellowship sowthers it a':	*southers=shoulders*
When at the blythe end o' our journey at last,	
Wha the Deil ever thinks o' the road he has past?	
Blind Chance, let her snapper and stoyte on her way,	*snapper=stumble; stoye=stagger*
Be't to me, be't frae me, e'en let the jade gae!	*gae=go*
Come Ease or come Travail, come Pleasure or Pain,	
My warst word is:- 'Welcome, and welcome again!'	*wasrt=worst*

Burns regarded this song, written in 1794, as a "self-portrait". So when he sat for the artist Alexander Reid for a "portrait miniature", he linked portrait and poem together, "in order that the portrait of my face and the picture of my mind may go down the stream of Time together". Here is a man who knew his "sorrow and care", *and* his "mirth and guid humour". Here is a man who was happy for his true self to be revealed in the portrait the world sees. "Contented wi' little, and cantie wi' mair." Do we know ourselves well enough to decide the true portrait we'd like the world to have of *our* life?

A prayer for today

Lord, let me be contented with the little I have, and joyful for the whole of life. Amen

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