

Sir Knight Henry Kent, Robert Burns, and the Stolen Poem

by Sir Knight Paul Rich

One of Brother Robert Burns (1759-1796) most recited works in Masonic circles, the poem "The Master's Apron", was actually written by an American Knight Templar.

If you are an active Mason, the chances are that you have heard "The Master's Apron" on many occasions:

Ther's mony a badge that's unco braw;
Wi' ribbon, lace and tape on;
Let kings an' princes wear them a' -
Gie me the Master's apron!
The honest craftsman's apron,
The jolly Freemason's apron,
Be he at hame, or roam afar,
Before his touch fa's bolt and bar,
The gates of fortune fly ajar,
'Gin he but wears the apron!
For wealth and honor, pride and power
Are crumbling stanes to base on;
Eternity suld rule the hour,
And ilka worthy Mason!
Each Free Accepted Mason,
Each Ancient Crafted Mason.
Then, brithers, let a halesome sang
Arise your friendly ranks alang!
Guidwives and bairnies blithely sing
To the ancient badge wi' the apron string
That is worn by the Master Mason!

Despite hundreds of web sites attributing the poem to Burns, it was printed in an American periodical The Granite State Monthly in 1882 as by Sir Knight Henry Oakes Kent. (1834-1909) "Written as a sentiment at a public banquet of North Star and visiting lodges, at Lancaster...." It turns out that our fellow Templar was very proud of "The Apron", and it is listed in his auto-biography, in the Genealogical and Family History of the State of New Hampshire (by Ezra S. Stearns and William Frederick Witcher, 1908) available on the web: "...his ballad 'The Master's Apron,' widely known of Masons." The lines appear as by Kent in 1902 in a much circulated fraternal humor book Goat Rides, Butts, and Goat Hairs,ii which is still in print.

Kent felt the call of the muse on many occasions. If he wasn't a famous poet, at least he did not lack industry.iii In the Genealogical and Family History we are told, "Colonel Kent has not confined his activity in literature entirely to prose, but has written some gems in verse

that would be a credit to a poet of acknowledged reputation..." His military service in the American Civil War and a successful legal career did not interfere with producing enough lines to earn pages in The Poets of New Hampshire in 1883.

A mountain in New Hampshire is named for him,(iv) but his moment in history was as an aide at Gettysburg to President Lincoln when Lincoln delivered the famous address, which Kent invariably noted in his Who's Who entries. An unsuccessful candidate for Governor of New Hampshire,v he was active for many years in North Star Lodge in his town of Lancaster, Grand Lecturer of the Grand Lodge of New Hampshire, and Grand Commander of the Knights Templar in New Hampshire. Contemporaries praised his geniality, presence, and "personal magnetism." (vi)

That his poem could be "stolen" from him and so often listed as by Robert Burns is really a huge compliment. His "Burnsian imagery" in the poem reflects the great influence Burns had in America. When Andrew Jackson ran for President in 1828, supporters chorused "Let auld acquaintance be forgot, And never brought to mind, and Jackson be our President and Adams left behind." vii

For the 250th anniversary of the birth of Burns, I was asked to give a paper in Edinburgh at an international conference on Freemasonry. The Scots were very good natured when I told them that the famous poem was really by a New Hampshire Sir Knight. Burns himself had a great sense of humor, and perhaps some famous lines by him (and they really are by him!) are appropriate about the whole case of the poem that wasn't what it seemed:

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft a-gley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promised joy.
Still thou art blest, compared wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But, oh! I backward cast my e'e
On prospects drear!
An' forward , tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Notes:

i On the web at:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=wRYXAAAAYAAJ&pg=PP10&lpg=PP?>

[10&dq=henry+o.+kent+master%27s+apron&source=bl&ots=UD61r2Zh-](http://books.google.com/books?id=wRYXAAAAYAAJ&pg=PP10&lpg=PP?10&dq=henry+o.+kent+master%27s+apron&source=bl&ots=UD61r2Zh-)

[h&sig=uCcBT8fYReZIo-8rFOU94YtDymo&hl=en&ei=9bcDSr?](http://books.google.com/books?id=wRYXAAAAYAAJ&pg=PP10&lpg=PP?h&sig=uCcBT8fYReZIo-8rFOU94YtDymo&hl=en&ei=9bcDSr?)

[7cOaCltgeB9sSPBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5](http://books.google.com/books?id=wRYXAAAAYAAJ&pg=PP10&lpg=PP?7cOaCltgeB9sSPBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5)and in Internet Archive

at http://www.archive.org/stream/granitestatemon08unkngoog/granitestatemon08unkngoog_djvu.txt.

"In the obit in the Proceedings of the Grand Commandery KT of NH Kent was 'editor and proprietor of the Coos Republican from 1858 to 1870.' I thought that might be a potential source for more Kent poetry" Jeffrey Croteau to Paul Rich, email, 12 May 2009.

ii James Pettibone, Goat Rides, Butts and Goat Hairs, C.B. Pettibone Publishers, Cincinnati, 1902, 109.

iii Grenville M. Doges, William Arba Ellis, Norwich University, 1819-1911, Vol.I, Capital City Press, Montpelier (Vermont), 1911, 391.

iv An account of climbing Mount Kent : http://www.alpinedave.com/mt_kent/mt_kent.html

v "Henry O. Kent for Governor: New Hampshire Democrats Make him Their Candidate", New York Times, 7 September 1894, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9F0DE0DB1531E033A25754C0A96F9C94659ED7CF>

vi John B. Clarke ed., Sketches of Successful New Hampshire Men, John B. Clarke, Manchester (New Hampshire), 1882, 24

vii Ferenc Morton Szasz, Abraham Lincoln and Robert Burns: Connected Lives and Legends, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale (Illinois), 2008, 37

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