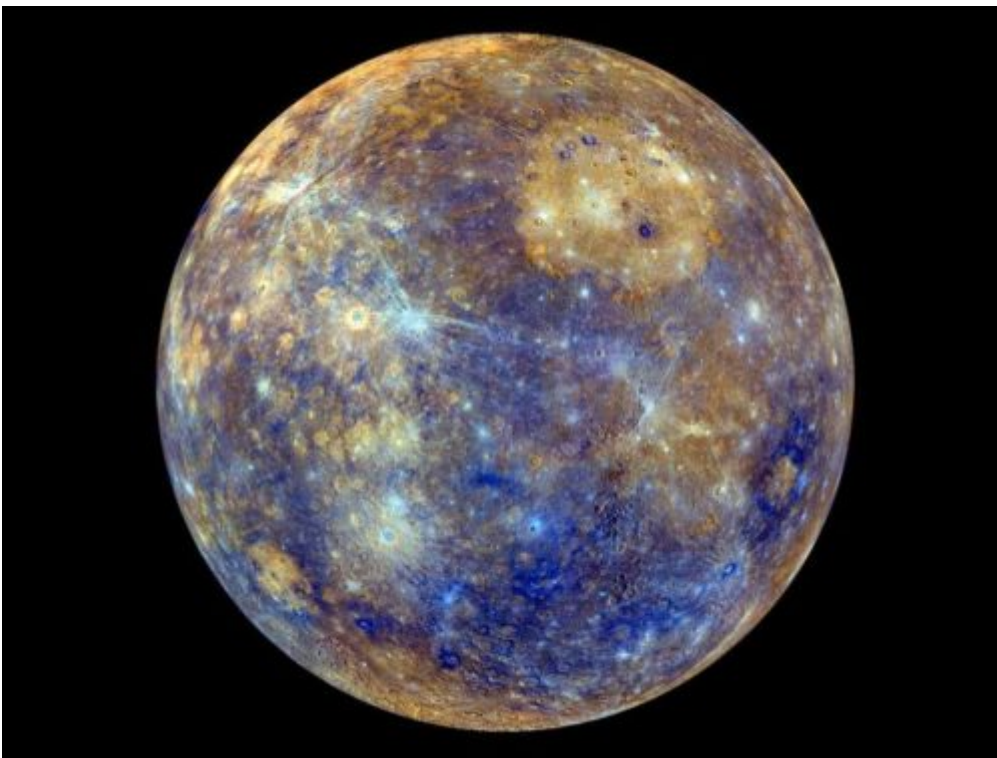


# Letter from Scotland

At many a Burns Night this weekend, drouthy cronies like me will be drinking to his memory and remarking that his fame as poet and “friend of the people” has spread to the very ends of the Earth. In fact, his fame goes further, out into the solar system. There is a crater on the planet Mercury named in his honour.



What has Robert Burns got to do with the planet Mercury ? It's not that much of an honour since there are 397 craters on Mercury, all of them named after poets, writers, musicians and artists from Bach to Zola. But the only other Scot is Robert Louis Stevenson and the crater is a handsome one, 43 kilometres in

diameter. Besides, no one else has written a song like "Auld Lang Syne" which I'm sure is sung all over the Milky Way.

Were he still with us, Burns would have plenty to say about our present troubles. In his Earnest Cry and Prayer to the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons, he says: "Arouse my boys! Exert your mettle, to get auld Scotland back her kettle." By which he means her pride and spirit, as well as her hardware.

It's always a moot point as to whether Burns would have voted for Scottish independence in 2016. And would he do so now if Brexit goes ahead. I think he might have enjoyed watching Nicola Sturgeon emerging from No 10 Downing Street on Wednesday saying the Prime Minister was "running scared" of a second referendum on Europe and a second referendum on Scottish independence. And who can say whether both might happen if there's continuing deadlock at Westminster after next Tuesday's confusing series of votes.

We got a further warning this week about the consequences of a no-deal Brexit. The employers' organisation the CBI has calculated that Scotland will be £14bn a year worse off if there's a hard Brexit, that's a loss of 8 per cent of our national income and who knows how many jobs. And this when we have just celebrated unemployment falling below 100,000 (3.6 per cent) for the first time since records began.

Ms Sturgeon didn't have her troubles to seek at home this week. Alex Salmond, her predecessor and mentor, was rumoured

to be coming back into active politics to campaign for a second independence referendum sooner rather than later. Then, on Thursday, came the news that he had appeared in court on 14 charges, including sexual assault and attempted rape. Mr Salmond immediately denied the charges and said he would be fighting the case vigorously.

Another troubling issue concerns the new £800m Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Glasgow. It's been plagued with a series of teething problems but the latest is the death of a child due to an infection picked up from pigeon droppings in the water system. There's now a review going on into the design and construction of the building and whether there are enough maintenance staff.

At a time when chefs have become celebrities, we were all diminished by the death of one of Scotland's finest chefs, Andrew Fairlie. He was only 55 and had cancer. He was head chef at Gleneagles Hotel for 17 years, during which time he won two Michelin stars. He leaves a wife, Kate, and two daughters. We also lost a well known champion of the hills this week, Dr Adam Watson, climber, naturalist, campaigner. "Mr Cairngorms" they called him. He was 89, a wiry man with a long white beard.

Scotland has also lost its place as home to the largest number of distilleries in Britain. There are now more distilleries in England than in Scotland, 166 to 160. But, hang on, a lot of these English distilleries are a result of the gin-boom and are small affairs. We still have 128 proper whisky distilleries, more than we've had since before the Second World War.

Finally, news just in from 56 million years ago. Apparently the Isle

of Skye was the scene of a massive volcanic eruption which plunged the Earth into a climate change catastrophe which would have wiped out humankind if we'd been around then. First we'd have been frozen as the Sun's rays were blocked out by clouds of ash, and then flooded as carbon dioxide caused averages temperatures to rise by 8 degrees Celsius. Researchers from the University of St Andrews, among others, have figured this out from "pitchstones" which were thrown up to 30km from the original explosion but which have marked similarities.



Robert Burns looks down on us from his plinth in Paisley. Photo by Robert Orr.

Such big ideas are no problem to the bard we celebrate this weekend. In *My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose*, Burns happily declares that his love for his “rose” will exist “Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear, and the rocks melt with the sun.” Let’s hope that doesn’t happen any time soon.

Our main photo above serves to remind you of the full programme of events in the [Burns&Beyond](#) Festival in Edinburgh this week.