

The fake news about Robbie Burns

He certainly liked a drink, but the long-held belief that Robert Burns was an alcoholic is the result of “fake news” spread first in Edinburgh after his death, according to a leading expert on Scotland’s national bard.

Burns produced songs and poems right up until his death in 1796 at the age of just 37, at the time attributed to alcoholism.

Experts now believe his death is likely to have been due to the effects of a bacterial infection on pre-existing chronic rheumatic heart disease – and his rapid demise may have begun with severe toothache.

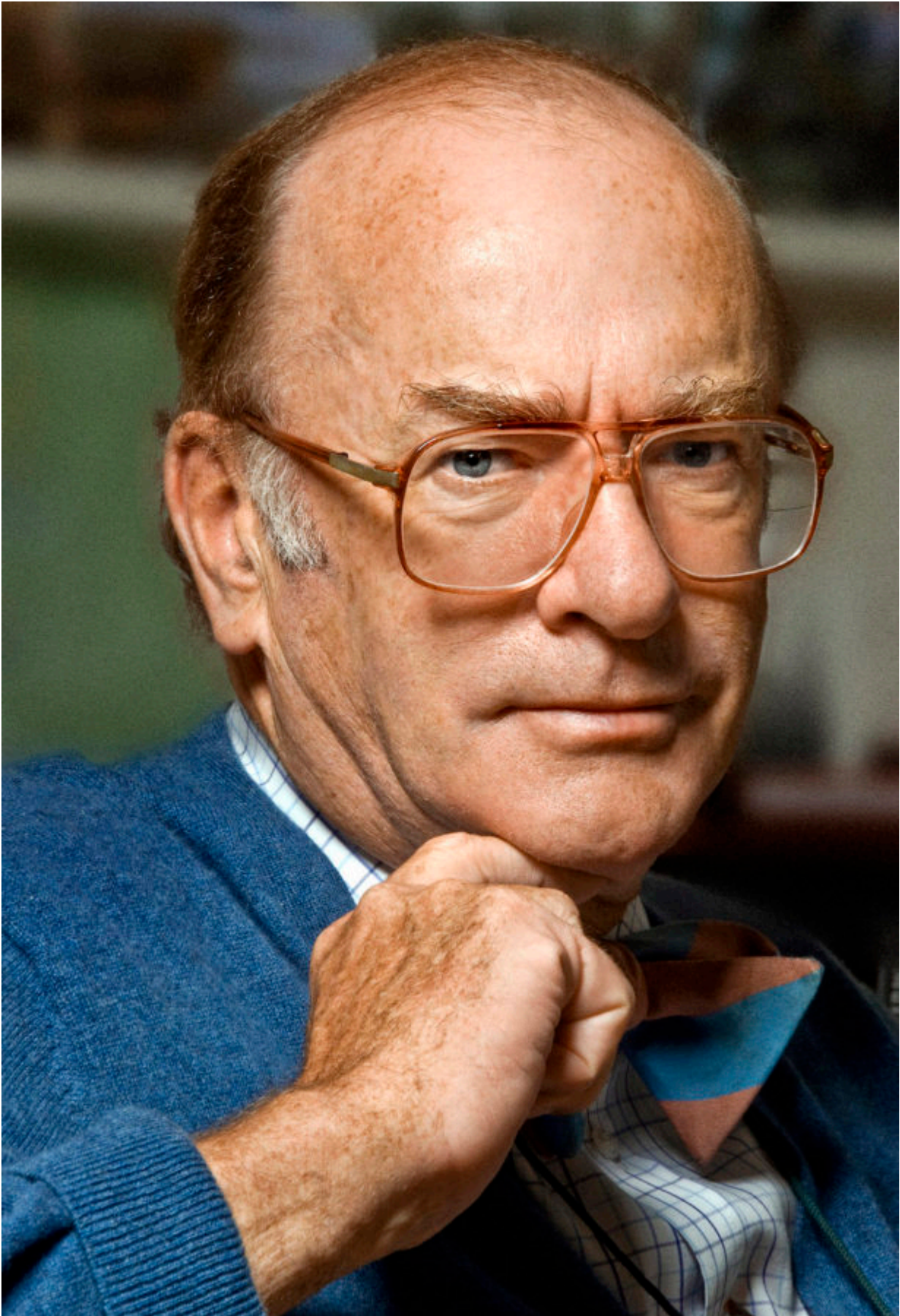
Professor David Purdie, a doctor of medicine, Burns expert and co-author of the Burns Encyclopedia, has said the poet was not an alcoholic at all. Professor Purdie is Honorary Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) of Edinburgh University (where his field is the history and philosophy of the 18th century).

Speaking in Edinburgh, he said on an episode of the National Trust for Scotland’s Love Scotland podcast: “It is a regrettable fact that (Burns) died twice. He died physically at the age of 37 in Dumfries, and then he was assassinated post mortem in an unsigned obituary in what is now the

Edinburgh Evening News – the evening newspaper here in Edinburgh – saying he died a hopeless alcoholic, “useless to himself and to his family, being perpetually stimulated by alcohol”.

“This was unsigned and many of us have tried very hard to find out who actually wrote these words because they are simply fake news.

“In brutal summary, the poet was no teetotaler but like all sensible men and women he confined his enjoyment of the grape and the grain to the social and evening hours with his friends, and did not let it intrude on his domestic duties to his wife Jean Armour, the family or to his professional business as an officer of the Scottish Excise Service and for his military duties, because for the last two years of his life he was a soldier in the Royal Dumfries Volunteers.”



Dr David Purdie,
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See story from George Mair, Saltire News and Sport (Mob: 07703 172 263)

Purdie said that after the publication of the obituary, it was repeated in the first biography of Burns by Dr James Currie.

He said Jean Armour protested against the description of Burns as an alcoholic but was ignored, while his brother Gilbert "did not speak up strongly enough about the actuality of the poet's life and his habits", possibly because the biography was written to support the family.

He said: "It was picked up – as fake news is picked up – repeated, amplified, and still across the world today you will find people who believe this."

Purdie said that the disciplinary records of both the excise service and Royal Dumfries Volunteers reveal no record of Burns being "incapable or in any way affected by alcohol".

And had the poet lived another 18 months he would have been promoted and appointed supervisor of excise at Port Glasgow. He gained "congratulations and approval from his superiors" for his work as an exciseman.

The Reverend James Gray, rector of Dumfries Academy, wrote in a letter published in a subsequent biography: "For the five years that he lived in this town, and where I was educating his sons with others at the academy, I saw him almost every day and never once in that experience did I observe him affected by alcohol."

Purdie said: "What did kill him came for him very quickly and was merciless."

Burns fell ill in 1781 when he was 21 and developed what is thought to have been acute rheumatic fever. Before he died, it was noted that he had slowed down, complained repeatedly of joint pains and lost weight remarkably fast.

Purdie said Burns' rheumatic fever led to a weakened heart, which eventually killed him. But his rapid decline may have begun with toothache.

He told the [podcast](#) host, NTS president Jackie Bird: "The problem which occurs through toothache is apical root abscess – a highly infectious and very dangerous condition in the root of a tooth where bacteria spill from the tooth into the bloodstream and if you've got a heart which is affected by the long term effects of rheumatic fever then there's going to be a problem.

"We think that the heart problem was what's called mitral stenosis – the mitral valve is one of the great valves within the heart itself which propels the blood out from the ventricles into the other chambers of the heart and eventually round the body to supply us with oxygenated blood. If that valve is damaged it is very prone to attack by bacteria if they get into the bloodstream and that is what we think happened with Burns.

"In this damaged heart, the mitral valve damaged and then an apical root abscess or something similar – any other infection delivering bacteria into the bloodstream – it would settle on that valve and begin the process of what we think was the terminal event.

"The terminal event was acute endocarditis – the inner lining of the heart including the valve got infected and led to the terminal events of his life – the rapid loss of weight, the continuing fevers, the pain in the joints...

"It was endocarditis that slew him in the end."

He added: "The poet was no teetotaller, not at all. Sometimes he overdid it, there is no question of that, in the evening hours with his friends in the taverns of Dumfries or Ayr or wherever but he was no alcoholic.

“His behaviour and what was observed about him do not support that.”

