

■ Christopher dressed as Burns in Moscow.

Russian soldier gave Christopher a real fright

By Sarah Johnson

STANDING IN Moscow's Pushkin Square, Christopher Tait should have been intimidated when a Russian soldier marched towards him, pointing an accusing finger. But he's come to expect a reaction wherever he goes.

"Are you Robert Burns?" the soldier demanded. As Christopher hesitated the soldier hugged him and said, "I love Burns!" then recited one of his poems in Russian.

Having travelled the globe — including Moscow, Kuala Lumpur, Dubai and New York — as Scotland's favourite son, Christopher is one of the world's leading Burns performers.

The actor started performing as Burns 15 years ago, turning professional in 1999. Since then he's been inundated with work. He says, "Burns has been translated into 50 different languages. They teach Burns as part of the curriculum in Russia, and we share the same patron saint. The St Andrew Society of Russia has invited me over a number of times.

"When we were in Pushkin Square, a crowd of a few hundred started to gather and officials were starting to worry as big gatherings are discouraged. So when the soldier marched towards me I was concerned, but it turned out he'd been an admirer of Burns all his life.

"I think the strangest event was in 2002 when I was invited to perform on board a 1940s motor yacht on Lake Washington for the 60th birthday of the Seattle Yacht Club's Commodore, who was of Scottish descent."

Christopher developed a passion for Burns when he was at school and entered recital competitions. But it wasn't until he was 21 and travelling in Australia that he rediscovered the poet.

"I came back to Scotland and started performing poetry, just me in a kilt. It was my dad's idea to work on an act so I put together a costume and 'became' Burns.

"When I tell women what I do they're curious," smiles Christopher, who unlike Burns is a one-woman-man, having met his Russian girlfriend Tatiana five years ago.

Lassies

He laughs, "I'm asked what I have in common with Burns. I perform his poetry and tell his story, but as for acting like him, no. I don't have a score of children by different lassies!"

But he does share Burns's admiration for the lady folk. He says, "Burns saved and spent six months' wages on a wedding dress for Jean Armour. He understood women were to be cherished."

This year Christopher is very much in demand. He explains, "Homecoming 2009 has raised Burns's profile even more, if that's possible. So instead of working three or four weeks over Burns Night I have bookings throughout the year."

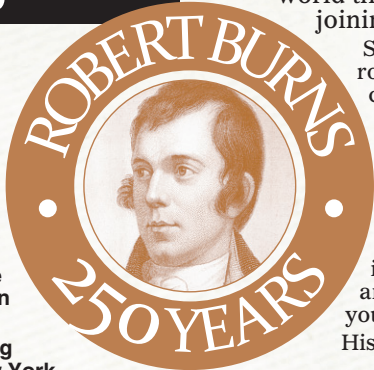
But he won't be giving up the day job. When he isn't taking his Robert Burns Live tour around the world he's Audio and Visual Manager for John Lewis in Edinburgh.

He also takes Rabbie into schools, helping pupils understand the life and works of the poet.

"They're fascinated. I tell them I've tied the horse up outside. Kids live in a visual world and I think it's important to introduce Burns as a character.

"They ask questions, and although I don't claim to be an expert, I hope I can make 250-year-old history interesting and help them understand Burns's poetry."

Today, Christopher will be performing at a free event at the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. For more information www.robertburnslive.co.uk



Tradition of suppers has made Rabbie Burns's secret he captures our

WE in Scotland have always been proud to proclaim Robert Burns as our national poet.

In bowling clubs and church halls, in swanky hotels and posh clubs, at kitchen tables and student flats there will be all sorts and sizes of Burns Supper this weekend, for today sees his 250th birthday.

But it would be wrong to say we own him exclusively — the whole world this weekend will be joining in the fun.

So how did our rantin' rovin' robin manage to cover the globe?

Scots look on him as a favourite son.

He received traditional values from his parents.

From his father, a hard-work ethic, the importance of education and a belief in standing on your own two feet.

His mother sang him the old

By Clark McGinn

songs of Scotland and told him tales of the kings and heroes, witches and bogles that make Scotland's story rich.

These two sides of a young lad's upbringing mixed into a powerful cocktail called poetry.

Our Rab found he had a gift with words — but not the poems you were forced to read in lessons in the words of formal English (the language of the school house, not of the pub or the kitchen).

Burns used the language of his people to craft verses on the events around him — the land, hard work, strong drink and love.

He soon found his words made lads laugh and, more importantly, it made the lassies smile.

His complex love life propelled him towards a new life in Jamaica and he resolved to publish his poems to build up some capital for his emigration.

The publication of his *Kilmarnock Edition* gave him the new life he sought — but here on his native soil.

His poems were read with enthusiasm throughout Scotland and soon expat Scots were requesting copies from all over Europe.

Burns was no longer a local phenomenon. Quickly the Americans complimented our poet by printing pirate editions in Philadelphia and New York and he has never been out of print.

Translations

The desire to read and understand Burns has resulted in translations into all the major languages of the world — and even into standard English.

His books were a key factor in the international spread of his popularity but the real impetus came in a more practical fashion — the Burns Supper.

In 1801, five years after his death, nine of the poet's cronies met in Burns Cottage.

They ate haggis, recited his poems, sang his songs and raised a glass to the memory of their departed friend.

Sounds familiar doesn't it?



■ Left — the original Burns Cottage in Ayrshire, and (right) the replica built in Atlanta.

His Alloway cottage — in Atlanta, USA

By Sarah Johnson

IN 1757, aspiring market gardener William Burnes bought seven acres of land in Alloway and built a humble cottage.

His son Robert was born there on a cold January morning two years later.

Since then the home of Scotland's most famous son has become a must-see destination for poetry lovers.

But on the other side of the Atlantic, the Burns Club of Atlanta won't have far to travel to visit his birthplace — it's right on their doorstep.

One of Atlanta's best-kept secrets, the world's only replica of the simple Ayrshire "auld clay biggin" was built there in 1911.

As early as the 1870s, Burns admirers there met in private to celebrate his birth. On January 25, 1896, they became a club and in 1907 decided to build a clubhouse.

A nine-acre site was bought by founder member Dr Joseph Jacobs — a pharmacist whose drugstore in the city was used to test-market Coca Cola — on the understanding the club would pay him back.

They contacted a Scottish draughtsman who provided exact measurements, for \$26, of the original Alloway cottage

and plans for new streets, including Alloway Place and Ayr Place, were drawn up.

The cottage was completed in 1910, costing approximately \$2431, plus an additional \$100 for the thatched roof. Originally on Atlanta's outskirts, it's now in a residential neighbourhood within the city limits.

The house, at 988 Alloway Place, isn't open to the public but last October Shonaig McPherson, Chairwoman of the National Trust for Scotland, was invited to see it.

Redesigned in 1969 to improve the resemblance, the interior has been adapted for club use, with an assembly room replacing the barn and byre and a kitchen added.

Curved

The one-storey building is slightly curved, as was the original, which was built around a bend in the road.

Shonaig was staggered by the similarities. "We'd been doing research into how revered Burns was across the world and discovered the cottage in Atlanta. It's a very active society and I was delighted to be invited.

"Most of the members have

Scottish ancestors and they're all keen to be involved in Scottish activities. Burns's legacy is important to them. They're 4000 miles away but still feel connected and have such an affinity with him by celebrating his life and works. I found that very moving.

"It proves Burns is still relevant today and his poems touch man, no matter where you are.

"The club's very proud of the cottage, and rightly so."

The interior is divided into the traditional four areas — butt, ben, barn, and byre. At the far end is the butt, which would have been the kitchen, dining room and parents' bedroom.

The ben is the living room and children's bedroom, which in Atlanta is decorated with Burns memorabilia.

The fireplace in the centre of the cottage has a stone plaque in memory of the poet.

An alarm system guards the beloved "auld" cottage 24 hours a day.

Mac Irvin, American representative of The World Burns Federation and a club member for 25 years, said, "We meet once a month and on Burns's birthday. We've even had weddings there.

"It originally had a thatched

roof but we have to live within the building codes and couldn't get insurance against fire."

Mac says he came to Burns late compared to some of the 100 members. "Some have been in the club for 50 years but I became interested when I went to see a performance of *Rab The Rhymer* and a friend invited me to a meeting."

Monument

Mac said, "We privately fund the cottage and don't publicise it. It's been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1983 and is listed as a Burns monument."

The members celebrated last night with a Burns Supper and today Mac will lay a wreath at one of the several Burns busts they have at the cottage.

Mac, who has visited Scotland many times, said, "I think Burns had an admiration of freedom and respect for common people.

"Someone once said 'He wrote like an angel, lived like a man'."

■ The original Burns Cottage at Alloway is to be restored as part of The National Trust for Scotland's Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, due to open in 2010. To donate visit www.nts.org.uk/Burns