

Victorian Heritage Database Report
Robert Burns Statue - John Greenshields



Location:

Heritage Status / Level of Significance:

State

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number: H2328

Listing Authority: VHR

Statement of Significance:

What is significant? The statue of the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796) was carved by John Greenshields (1792-1835) probably at Milton, on the Clyde River, Glasgow no later than the end of 1830. Greenshields based the work on a painting by Peter Taylor (c1756-1788) documented as being from life and the earliest likeness made of Burns. The statue was commissioned by William Taylor who was descended from the same great-great-grandfather as Peter Taylor. William Taylor, a soap manufacturer, was a respected citizen of Leith where he was a magistrate and a provost (mayor).

In 1859 the statue was exhibited at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham, London, as part of the Burns Centenary celebrations. In 1866 it was bequeathed by William Taylor to his son William Andrew Taylor. Taylor emigrated to Victoria in 1876 where he settled in Camperdown, married Isabella Dawson and established a farm called Renny Hill. During the family's 1882-83 visit to Britain, Taylor arranged for the statue to be shipped from London to Camperdown: it arrived in March 1883 and was in place in April 1883, the Taylors arriving back in June. The pedestal for the statue was designed by architect Alexander Hamilton and was erected at the end of 1883.

Robert Burns was among the first of the Romantic poets, writing in both the dialect of lowland Scotland and 'mainstream' English as then spoken by educated, influential and politically savvy Scots. He incorporated the Scottish Enlightenment ideals of democracy, fairness, individual responsibility and independence into his poems and songs. Burns received international recognition for the way he was able to weave his ideals, insights and political and social awareness into his poetry, which, with large-scale Scottish emigration, took strong root in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The statue is life-size and carved from a block of buff-coloured sandstone. Burns, wearing a countryman's hat, brim turned up at the sides, is shown seated on a forked tree stump, left hand resting on left thigh, and right elbow resting on the stump, with the right hand thrust inside the waistcoat. Burns' dog Luath sits beside the left leg. The statue has a two-metre high pedestal. Greenshields, in seating Burns on the tree stump, 'enfleshes' Burns' words: "One night as I did Wander,/ When corn begins to shoot,/ I sat me down to ponder,/ Upon an auld tree root."

How is it significant? The statue of Robert Burns is significant for historic and aesthetic reasons at the State level.

Why is it significant? The statue of Robert Burns is significant for historic reasons because it is representative of the cultural influences of Scottish migration to Australia and Victoria in particular. The work is a marker of early 19th century Scottish artistic and cultural achievement transplanted into the colony of Victoria and, as such, symbolises the ongoing sense of identity felt so strongly among the Scottish diaspora across the world. By including a representation of Burns in a public place, the society of that time was acknowledging the importance it placed on the Scottish Enlightenment ideals of democracy, fairness, individual responsibility, and independence.

The statue is believed to be the oldest statue of Burns in the world. It is the only statue to have been based exclusively on the first portrait of the poet. It is the oldest full-body statue in a public place in Australia (the first public statue in Australia was not erected until the early 1840s in Sydney). It is the oldest all-weathers statue of Burns in the world.

The statue of is significant for aesthetic reasons because of the way Greenshields handled the complex pose of the figure and dog. He displays masterly technique in details such as the 'creases' in the boots, breeches and coat, even to the suggestion of the notebook crammed into Burns' coat pocket and the way the coat is caught up at the back. There is clear differentiation between the textures of the moleskin, leather, linen, bark of the tree and the dog's fur. John Greenshields emerged as the most feted and sought-after sculptor in Scotland between 1827 and 1830. At the height of his career, he held the distinction of being the country's pre-eminent artist in the (then) dominant local medium of sandstone. Aesthetically, he trumped those of his fellow Scottish artists who, with him, pioneered the first generation of Burns statuary.

Classified: 22/02/2010

Heritage Study / Consultant	
Construction Date Range	
Architect / Designer	
Municipality	CORANGAMITE SHIRE
Other names	
Hermes number	120513
Property number	B0515

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