

An Interview With Dini Power

17/05/2024



Beyond Burns: The Ellisland Switch On

1956

Dini Power is the daughter of Glaswegian-born actor John Power. During the Ellisland Switch On of 1956, John took on the lead role as Robert Burns. Earlier this year we interviewed Dini about her father; who he was and his connection with Ellisland. The following interview gives an insight into the Ellisland Switch On, the scale of the event, and its place within the wider socio-economic context of mid-20th century industry.

1. Can you tell us a bit about the Ellisland Switch On of 1956?

The Switch On of 1956 is probably best explained by my father himself, in the following extract from a memoir he wrote about five years before he died. His connection with the electricity industry started when he got a job as a meter reader with the South of Scotland Electricity Board (SSEB) in 1950. His supervisor had persuaded him to join the Electricity Players, a drama club who met at the SSEB stores at Glasgow's Port Dundas.

“At this time the electricity generating industry was having to fight very hard to increase sales. The gas industry was a monopoly. We had three shops, or showrooms as they were called then. Apart from selling electric kettles, irons and blankets we rented cookers and water heaters. No major appliances were sold. They were rented or hired to our consumers. Many houses in Glasgow used gas for lighting and some had a two pin socket to accommodate a radio or

iron. It has to be said that this was the case in old tenement buildings, but even in our flat in Provanhill Street, built in 1937/38, we had a two pin socket in the living room. In houses built after the war there were sockets in every room and it was our aim to ensure that we sold enough appliances to utilise every socket. In 1948 the electric generation industry was nationalised, and gradually the stick in the mud attitude of the Glasgow Corporation Electricity Department was changed to a more energetic and progressive one. As the Corporation employees retired or moved on to other things the industry started to get into gear and the only way was 'up'. It was a ground breaking decision to start selling appliances instead of hiring them. The reader has to know this bit of history in order to understand why we did one of the biggest advertising schemes in British retail history. Hugh Murray, the assistant Chief Commercial Officer, was responsible for the biggest advertising campaign of the time. The SSEB got unlimited publicity from a poet, long dead. His name was Robert Burns. Every January the birthday of Rabbe Burns is celebrated with a Burns Supper. Now if we could make it a supper with the aid of electricity, in January, we would have a powerful weapon to beat the opposition.

A writer of the time, David Murray (no relation to Hugh) was commissioned to write a one act play on the ghost of Robert Burns returning to Ellisland Farm on

the day that it was connected to the mains electricity supply. Ellisland Farm is only a few miles from Dumfries and was occupied by Burns at one time. The play was to be performed in Dumfries on the poet's anniversary on 25 January, 1956, to coincide with the connection of the electricity supply. Our drama group played the parts of the actual family who lived at Ellisland farm at that time. I was chosen to play the part of Burns, not on acting ability, but I was the nearest in age, physique and general appearance to the popular conception of what the poet looked like. The setting of the play is the living room of Ellisland Farm with members of the family knitting, sewing and reading. It is Burns' anniversary. A spell descends on the group and the spirit of Burns appears. He is astonished to see the variety of electric appliances used for everyday tasks and is impressed by the electric light. Of course he wishes that these items had been available in his time, and the play ends with the spirit of Burns vanishing and the family becoming conscious as if coming out of a hypnotic trance. The play was entitled 'A Licht Wi' Burns'.

On the 25th January, which was a crisp, freezing day, the cast, in the costumes worn in the play, were assembled at the hotel and transported to Ellisland Farm. We stopped at the road leading to the farm where an open coach and four white horses were waiting to take Burns, Jean Armour, Highland Mary and the Earl of

Dalswinton up the mile long, rutted track to the farmhouse. The rest of the cast travelled in comparative comfort in motor cars. I was wearing the type of clothing that Burns might have worn. A single breasted tail coat which was open to show an ornate waistcoat, a pair of white cotton trousers with calf length boots and a top hat. I really would have frozen to death if it had not been for the fact that underneath the trousers I wore my pyjamas. Even then I was perishing with cold. Baillie William Wallace (his real name) was present to welcome Burns and his friends at the main door of the farmhouse. The microphones had been set up. The BBC TV people and reporters and photographers were there and I had to say a few words of script before entering the farmhouse. Once inside I met the real family in residence who were overwhelmed by the mass of media people. I posed with an electric cooker where I addressed a haggis in a pan on the cooker hob. Cameras flashed all over the place and eventually we all packed up and left. It had been quite a day. I was glad to get back to the hotel where I could get into warmer clothes. In those days television was in the early stages of development. Any film taken had to go to BBC London for national transmission. Unfortunately, the weather conditions delayed the aircraft which would have delivered the film to London for broadcasting that night. The result was that the film was never seen by the nation because it arrived too late. It was probably thought that if it could not be broadcast on the 25th January it would not be newsworthy, or maybe it was rubbish!"

My Dad was presented with an album of photos from the event, and also had another album with press cuttings which looks to have been put together by the Electricity Players. These are faded now but still readable. I also have the original programme for the concert that accompanied the event.

2. Can you tell us a bit about your father, John Power?

My father was born in Glasgow in 1927 of Irish -born parents. He left school at the age of 13, so was largely self-educated. He did his National Service between 1946 and 1948, latterly being posted to The Hague where he met and married my mother, Dini. He was a clever man who kept abreast of world events and could be relied on to answer most questions you might ask him about history and politics. He was a socialist, but like many men avoided getting actively involved in politics because of the effect it could have on his eligibility for jobs. He took up public speaking and amateur dramatics to try and 'iron out' his Glasgow accent, again with the hope that it would give him more chance of work and disguise his lack of formal education. It paid off to some extent in that he eventually became a showroom manager and then got involved in training salesmen, not bad for someone who started as a meter reader. He was a great

raconteur and wrote a fascinating memoir which covers the period from his early childhood up to the Ellisland Switch On.

3. Do you have any personal outstanding memories of Ellisland?

The Ellisland Switch On took place two years before I was born so I have no memories of it. I remember being aware of the photo albums, and when I was very small I believed for a time that Rabbie Burns and my father must be the same person! I don't recall ever visiting Ellisland with him as we grew up, or of him reading much of Burns' writing. Nor did he ever perform at a Burns Supper, to my knowledge. But he did come up with quotations from time to time, usually of Burns' more political statements relating to 'man's inhumanity to man', 'the unco' guid', or 'a parcel o' rogues in a nation'.

4. Any other notable memories you haven't had the opportunity to discuss?

I often think it's a shame that the Switch On event never got televised as intended, for who knows what opportunities might have come out of it for the actors. My dad continued to perform in amateur plays until he was in his late fifties, and it seemed like the stage was his natural element. The last play I saw

him perform in was *Wishing Well* by E Enyon Evans, at the McLellan Galleries in Glasgow, for which he got great reviews.