

J. HUNTER, DUMFRIES -- IMMORTAL MEMORY . (1899) .

The contents of the historic punch-bowl having been dispensed, Mr Hunter proposed "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns. He said they could imagine how the thoughts of those gathered together that night to do honour to the memory of the immortal bard at home, and more especially abroad, would go out to those places and scenes connected with his short and chequered life. Dumfries was specially interesting as being the resting-place of the mortal remains of Scotland's national bard, the Mecca of lovers of Burns, at whose shrine thousands from all parts of the world come yearly to worship. They should consider themselves happily situated who lived in Dumfries, for they were surrounded by the favourite haunts of the poet and places dear to all admirers of him by his association with them. Speaking of Burns and Dumfries, they could not overlook the cause to which they were indebted for his residence in this town, namely, to take up his duties as an exciseman.

It was only to be expected that those connected with the Excise should take a peculiar interest in Burns, seeing that he was one of them. They were justly proud that such a genius was numbered among their ranks; and one thing gave them greater pleasure still, the satisfaction of knowing that when clouds of misfortune gathered round him, his brother officers of all grades stood by him and rendered what assistance they could to alleviate his sufferings during the closing scenes of his life, and this about the time when they were told he walked the shady side of the street alone and unheeded by the gay throng who walked the other, given the cold shoulder by some of those who had lauded and lionised him for a short period of his varied career. The records show that he did his duty as an official. The work might not have been congenial to one of his poetic nature, but, as he said, it was a necessity. Farming had failed him, and he was glad to undertake the duties, as his family must be provided for in some way. He wrote:-

"These movin' things ca'd wives and weans,
Wad move the very heart o' stanes."

That his brother officers stood by him in his time of need they had sufficient proof in the poet's own writings. Collector Mitchell he addressed thus:-

"Friend of the poet, tried and leal,
Who wanting thee might beg or steal?"

Supervisor Findlater, who lived many years after the poet, sat up at night during the poet's illness, and his testimony ranks amongst the highest as to the character of Burns as a citizen and an official.

Who could speak with better judgment, when he was daily in the poet's company as his supervisor? They were all familiar with the name of Jessie Lewars, who nursed Burns during his last illness.

She was the daughter of another Excise official in Dumfries; and last, there was Peter Stobie, who officiated for the poet and allowed him to retain his full salary, refusing to take the half that was due to him as officiator. He also took that opportunity as an Englishman, to say a few words on behalf of those south of the Tweed. There was an opinion to some extent among those North of the Border, that Burns was not understood and appreciated in England. Speaking from personal experience, he could state that that was not correct. A speaker at the afternoon part of that grand function held in 1896, to celebrate the centenary of the poet's death — a representative from across the herring pond — said he had heard their "neighbours south of the Tweed complain that they had to use a glossary in reading Burns." In the first place, it was not a wise thing to believe all one heard; and, in the second, he didn't see the English need be ashamed if they had to use a glossary.

It could not be expected that one born in England could read and understand many words peculiarly Scotch, or some of the pawky phrases so pregnant with meaning to a Scotsman. It showed, however, that they spared no trouble to read and understand, and were determined to master the works of the immortal bard. The speaker to whom he referred, went on to say further that "they at least in America, understood Robert Burns, if they did not in England." He (Mr. Hunter) thought at the time he was taking a great responsibility on himself to speak for a great continent like America. As a lover of Burns, he trusted that his words so far as the former country was concerned, were to the letter true, but he should be sorry to believe his statement concerning the latter, and had no hesitation in saying that the percentage of admirers of Burns in England would compare with that of America or any other country; in fact, he could safely say it would exceed that of any other country, and so it should. Besides, was not the America to which he referred peopled by descendants of both Scotch and English, and more than from either, by the Irish? If a large part of England does not understand Burns in every sense of the word, he was ignorant of the fact. We had had the testimony of English visitors in this hall.

Further, he did not think it was the opinion of the majority of the members of the Burns Howff Club that such was the case, or he should not be privileged to occupy the chair that night. He was grateful to the members of this Club that they had bestowed up on him this honour of presiding over a Burns' meeting held within the walls of the historic Globe Hotel, and occupying for one night the chair used by the poet himself. It would in the future, when his lot was cast elsewhere, be one of his proudest boasts. He echoed the words of Lord Roseberry that some phonograph had then existed which could have communicated to them some of the poet's wise, witty, and wayward talk as

he sat in that chair surrounded by a few favoured cronies. It was their duty, as members of a Burns club and admirers of the ploughman bard, to bring amongst them strangers of whatsoever nationality they might be, so long as they had at heart the cause of Burns; and he hoped the day was not so far distant when they might have a Chinaman, a Japanese, or even a Hindoo presiding over a Burns' meeting, and even occupying that chair.

They should in reality believe we were getting near that perfect state when

"Man to man the world o'er
Shall brothers be and a' that."

referring to Mr Henley's writings, the speaker said

Burns was not a saint nor a hypocrite, and no one knew better his failings than himself. Did he not write:—

"The poor inhabitant below
Was quick to learn and wise to know,
And keenly felt the friendly glow
And softer flame;
But thoughtless follies laid him low,
And stained his name."

And did he not wish:—

"In ploughman phrase, God send you speed
Still daily to grow wiser,
And may you better reckon the rede
Than ever did the adviser."

A man whose feelings could go out to the lower ranks of nature, whose heart glows with sympathy for every living thing, and who sees not a mouse, "wee, sleekit, tim'rous beastie," turned up in her nest, nor the daisy, "wee, modest, crimson—tipped flower," crushed with the tearing ploughshare, without a pang and an outburst of human feeling, must be, at heart, good. He has enshrined himself in the heart of hearts of peer and peasant alike, the man of highest culture and the humblest mechanic and tiller of the soil, and had risen to an elevation

in the affections of his countrymen and lovers of song in general which has no parallel in the annals of literature. "A hundred years hence I shall be better respected and more appreciated," said he to his bonnie Jean on his deathbed. How true this prophesy was, we who saw the scene on the completion of that time on the 21st July, 1896, can testify. The poet's life was comparatively a short one, but he went through and saw many and varied phases of it. There are various opinions as to whether his death came at an op^portune time. It is not for us to judge.

It is sufficient to know that:—

"Now he haunts his native land
An immortal youth; his hand
Guides every plough.
He sits beside each ingle nook,
His voice is in each rushing brook,
Each rustling bough."

At his death, his countrymen's eyes were opened in time to succour and honour those who bore his name, and Scotland cherishes with an undying love, the memory of Robert Burns. In all countries many great men and prophets have been neglected, and even put to death, and Scotland may hold up her head in comparison to these. That the memory of the poet is undying, we firmly believe, for his works are surely destined to live through all ages. I therefore ask all present to drink in solemn silence to "The Immortal Memory Of Robert Burns."