

Mr Leslie G MacDONALD. – Immortal Memory (1920).

Mr MacDonald; in proposing "The immortal Memory," said: - What we are here for to-night, and what you have set me to do is, to express 'our heartfelt ad-miration and love for him who is the pride and glory of our native land, this "cauld, auld huddle of grey hills, which we call hame" - the bard of love and humanity, the poet of lowly, labouring, loving peasant life. We are here to lift up our voices in praise of the immortal memory of the biggest, the warmest, the pitifulest, the tenderest, the manliest, most candid, and the most sensitive heart in all broad Scotland, at the end of the 18th century. In the surge of present day movements, one is almost impelled to speak of Burns as pre-eminently the poet of democracy, the poet of the rights and liberties of the common people whom, as one has tersely said, God must love, for he made so many of them. He has provided watchwords for our most ardent and advanced reformers. Here, for instance, is as neat an expression of his ideal as the keenest international comrade could desire, and mark you, delivered a century before the policy was heard of:-

"The golden age we'll then revive,
Each man will be a brither;
In harmony we all shall live,
And share the earth together."

Could the Labour orator find a pithier text to point his case than this?

"Lord, help me through this warld' care,
I'm weary, sick o't, late and air:
Not but I hae a richer share
Than mony ithers;
But why should ae man better fare
An' a' men brithers?"

Yet Burns was no demagogue. Had he aspired to this, he had every qualification and a rare opportunity. His lot was cast in troublesome times. Sedition and revolution could then plead a case which they cannot now, for neither political, religious nor social liberty as we interpret it, had then anything but nominal existence. Discontent was rife, and the masses of the people seemed to be awaiting a leader who should fan this to a devouring flame. In due time the leader appeared, and happily for country and humanity, he came, not in phrygian cap, not breathing vengeful destruction and slaughter, but he came clad in glorious, shining robes of song, bearing a message of peace, love, forbearance and joy. True democracy rests not in the mis-called labouring wage slaves, nor in the so-called idle rich, nor in that patient creature of many burdens, the indefinable middle class. In its best sense it means, and ought to be co-extensive with, essential human nature. It is "the word primeval, the word en masse," and Burns' democracy is of this character, and where his all-embracing sympathy breaks through the artificial distinctions of class, you will find this set forth clearly. You have an echo of it in the "Twa Dugs," where Caesar depicts the frivolous lives of idle rich of his time. The whole of this splendid poem was bathed in a spirit of sympathy, kindly humanity, and broad tolerance which is often sadly wanting in some of our over-zealous Socialist orators, who mount the Dockhead parapet, not with tidings of salvation, but, like Moodie Of the "Holy Friar," with tidings of damnation for every class but their own — matter to be regretted. Socialism in itself has a good and strong case, and needs no advocacy by such questionable and unworthy means. His passion for democracy was not so much for a political levelling as for the recognition of the worth of man under all

disguises. As Margaret Fuller said:— "He is full of that genuine, noble democracy which seeks not to destroy royalty, but to make all men kings as he was himself in nature." So we, like him, may sing with heart and voice, "God save the King," and while singing thus, we also, like him, need 'ne'er forget the people.' The two sentiments are not incompatible, let the wild men of either party say what they will. He has no enmity to kings, peers or aristocrats; but throughout this message rings loudly and clearly that essential manhood is the only true greatness; and nothing can exalt a man but himself, and nothing abuse him but himself. From this ringing democratic note in Burns there came naturally his resounding contempt for wordly riches. He strikes this key early. In the rules of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club this one clearly betrays its authorship:— "And especially no mean—spirited, wordly mortal whose only will is to heap up money, shall on any pretence be admitted." Burns' brother owed the great folks a grudge, so much so as to interfere with his own peace and happiness. I daresay he was right. We are all apt to grouse like this occasionally:—

"It's hardly in a body's power
To keep at times frae being sour,
To see how things are shared."

So Burns the man; but Burns, the poet, never indulges this mood. All through his work his lofty contempt for riches is voiced in no uncertain tones. Akin to his passionate love for his own people is his burning patriotism, for with him democracy and patriot-ism go hand in hand. He was prophet of one as well as of the other. He sings a lofty patriotism, he saw clearly whence Scotia's grandeur springs, which made her "loved at home, revered abroad:" he was jealous of her with a sacred jealousy. He heard the mutterings of the great cataclysm which burst over Europe in his time, and, for his "dear, his native soil" he sent forth "his warmest wish to heaven," not for the in delights of some social paper paradise, not for the upheaval and rending of its ancient constitution, not for the sweeping away of "birkie" lords; but this, that, that her "hardy sons of rustic toil may be blessed with health and peace and sweet content — that their simple lives may not be corrupted by a soul—devouring luxury." His Immortal Memory: The world is ringing to—night with his name and fame. All over our far—flung Empire, wherever two or three brither Scots have foregathered, that is wherever the arts of peace are prosecuted, or blood is to be shed and victories won for King and country, his magic name will be pronounced, the right "gude willie waught" will be quaffed, and hand will clasp hand, and "Auld Lang Syne" will be sung, and their "fancy's flight" — swifter than "my dainty Oriel" — will be once again for one brief hour with kith and kin and auld acquaintance in the far—off Scottish home. This gathering of the clans, this bringing back of the lost tribes — what a supreme achievement of genius: His Immortal Memory: Aye, though his great heart is "mouldering now in silent dust," devouring Time has not yet dared to lay ruthless hand on "the polished leaves and berries red" of his poetic garland. The sun of fame shows no sign of setting on his empire:—

"For the glory of our poet,
In its deathless power serene,
Shines as rolling time advances,
Warmer felt and wider seen."
I give you Robert Burns.