

R A GRIERSON IMMORTAL MEMORY (1924)

In proposing the "Immortal Memory", Dr Grierson said:-

"I am here with an honest desire to express your thoughts about Robert Burns on this his birthday night. But I have proposed this toast too often. It is true that the interest in Robert Burns is so deep and widespread that there is material for many lectures about the various aspects of his life and work. A toast is something different. It is a communion - a gathering up of the united spirit of the company - a drawing out of a thread from each man's heart and weaving it into a common web. And when one has done that however feebly, if he has done it with the most that is in him, he has done it once and for all. But it is with a real sense of honour and pleasure that on your invitation I come here tonight; and I shall do my best. Of themselves and without any speech, and just because it is Burns' birthday night our hearts will be tuneful with song, they will beat in time to the great march of a message to men, they will be warm with our thoughts of a man. Could we divorce him from his genius and his message, the man might have been long ago forgotten, but the message could not be without the man, and seldom are the message and the man as one as in the case of Robert Burns. Each of us is "greatly dark" even to himself. How much more difficult therefore is it to throw the light on the life of another man, especially a man like Robert Burns? I shall therefore not try to make any analytical biographical investigation of his life, but simply try as best I can to show some of the main considerations which seem to me to make so great for us the man and his work together, for they are one and indivisible. There is an ancient Scottish legal maxim which says - "Nae man shall thole main than ane assize" which means that no man shall be tried more than once for the same offence. That is one of the foundations of personal liberty in Scotland. Yet, Robert Burns alone is this right denied. For more than 100 years he has been placed continually on trial, sometimes for high mis-demeanour, more often for petty offences, and like poor Peter Peebles in Scott's 'Red Gauntlet,' he has often suffered more from his advocates than from his persecutors. When they have tried him and often executed him they lay him upon the surgeon's table and use the dissecting knife. What we want to see in our mind's eye to-night is a living, breathing being, in the fulness of his manhood, and that is what the anatomist's knife will never give us. The result of all this continuous investigation of, and argument about every incident of Burns' life is to make many people see Burns with a distorted vision. They see him not with the open eye, but through glass. What we want is to see Burns, neither as prodigy, nor saint, nor sinner, not through glass, but face to face just as he was, just as the "Lad that was born in Kyle." For no man was truly himself than Burns, from the beginning to the end of his journey. Robert Burns he was born. As the same Robert Burns he lived, and he died Robert Burns. The wonderfulness of Burns - and he was and is wonderful - is not that he was wonderfully abnormal, but that he was wonderfully ordinary. What I am going to say for the next few moments may seem to bring Burns down to a common level, but I am about to do that only in order that I may show so far as so far as I can the great measure of his geight. You sometimes get the truth about a thing by comparing it with something else. Well let us apply this — very roughly and crudely it must be — to Robert Burns. The latter half of the eighteenth century in which he lived and the beginning of the nineteenth into which the span of his life ought to have reached had it been normal, were days of great events. The world was in the travail of a new birth, and as it often happens — though perhaps not always — great movements produce great men. So the niche in the Temple of Fame belonging to the eighteenth century contains many great figures, and among the very greatest of them

in Robert Burns. There was war throughout the whole period of his life and after — the Seven Years' War about the time of his birth, the American War of Independence afterwards. Then came the great culminating conflict with Napoleon which produced that wonderful military genius himself and created Wellington and Nelson to destroy him. Yet all the war—like exercise which Burns did in that time of world conquerors was a few months' drill with the Dumfries Volunteers. Those were days of great statesmen and orators, of Chatham who laid the foundation of our great colonial empire, of his son William Pitt, the pilot who weathered the storm, of Fox, of Sheridan, of Windham, and of Edmund Burke, whose magnificent eloquence had its ultimate triumph in its great settling in Westminster Hall at the trial of Warren Hastings. Yet amid all these Burns does not even appear to have been a member of a Local Council, and the setting for his eloquence was not Westminster Hall, but the Bachelors' Club at Tarbolton and the Freemasons' Lodge. During the earthquakes of the French Revolution when Robespierre, Danton and others mounted on each other's shoulders to power, and when in England "Liberty Wilkes" received the plaudits of the people as he rode in the gilded coach of the Lord Mayor of London, Burns' greatest outward acts of revolution were his presentation to the Dumfries Mechanics institute of "De Lolme," and his attempt to send the carronades to the French Government, brought him not the martyrdom of the guillotine, but a rebuke from the District Supervisor of Excise. While Dr Johnson a man of as great early poverty, was holding court in the taverns and coffee—houses among the wits of London, Burns' audience, except for his short period in Edinburgh, was mainly the society of the provincial inn. Even in those vices of which his critics make so much, Burns was very ordinary. In the days when men astonished their neighbours by gambling away their ancestral estates, Burns speculated in nothing more than a bad farm, and he died worth the prosaic sum of £180. In times when vice often assumed the glamour of gallantry, and romance (I am not excusing, but comparing) had little more romantic than the ordinary sins of the countryside and their attendant troubles with the Kirk Session. Among the convivial heroes of those days, it seems to me that Burns was a mere pigmy with a weak stomach. This commonplace life was so led by his own deliberate choice. From Edinburgh he might have sought, like Johnson, a metropolitan literary career. He might, through the interest of patron, have made some name for himself in some part of political service. He is said to have thought of it. Edmund Burke obtained his political fame, from a not much greater beginning. We might even have led the Scottish Revolutionaries of his day, and as Margaiot did a little later have reached the fame of a political trial before the Lords of Justiciary. One thing I think is clear, his only expressed decision was for a small farm and an exciseman's place "to make a happy fireside clime for weans and wife." Yet this man whose life, looked at externally and apart from genius, was so prosaic, whose life's journey was no further than from Ayr to Dumfries with a look in at Edinburgh, who began as a ploughman and ended as an exciseman, is the only one among these his great contemporaries for whom the whole world holds festival to-day. We think of these other men if we may happen to see their monuments in Westminster Abbey or elsewhere. We think of some of them with gratitude and admiration, of some of them with dislike tempered by lapse of time, but we think of them all as dead. Burns lives and why? Burns is very truly the poet of the common people, and he is something more. He is the voice of those simple yet elemental and eternal things which are common to all people. The loves of men and women, the love of children and kindred and home-and country, of sunlight and woods and streams — joy and sorrow, friendship and sympathy, honesty and independence. Those things which Burns himself says "however diversified by the modes and manners of life operate pretty

much alike, I believe, in all the species." These are the waters of life that run deep. Above them and around them are all 'sorts of varieties and inequalities, but they remain the streams common to all. They are choked by the alluvium of riches. They are damned back by the stone wall of poverty - they are poisoned by passion. They are run often through culverts and sewers, and the sound of them is lost. Burns brought them out again into the sunlight. He made them sing again, not a new song but the old one - not his song but their own. He himself gave a simple illustration of the note of all his message. You remember the story told by Edinburgh. The smoke was rising from the cottage chimneys in the still morning air. "He told me," says Stewart, "as I was admiring a distant prospect, that the sight of so many smoking chimneys gave a pleasure to his mind which none could understand who had not witnessed like himself the happiness and worth they contained." I do not want to speak of the home in that tone of sentiment which I and other people are sometime apt to use at these social gatherings, at which we have very cheerfully resolved that we will not go home till 2 o'clock in the morning. But what Burns said is not sentiment but solid truth. The smoking chimney is the sign and symbol of the true voice of the people. That people's voice with which Burns spoke. It may have been crushed for the time beneath feudal power. It may sometimes of itself proclaim dictators to rule over it. It may sometimes be merged in the mercy of the crowd, but because it speaks from the common emotions which are the inheritance of all sorts and conditions of men from generation to generation, it never-dies. It is at one and the same time, both the great Revolutionary and the great Conservative force. It will always sooner or later pull down the arrogant and mighty from his seat whether he be prince or plutocrat or burgess or proletarian. It will always sooner or later exalt simple and honest and faithful men and policies. It was into this constant voice from the people's heart that Burns breathed, and gave a purer, stronger, more hopeful note. And in his simple road through the world, he probably saw more of the reality of life than most men. He knew it in the country village and in the burgh town, and something too of the social and lettered life of the Capital city. It is, of course, said to a great extent no doubt truly, Burns' knowledge of the upper and lettered classes was really only from the outside. No doubt there were circles in Edinburgh and in the country in which, though he was admitted to them, he must have always been something of an alien. But could he associate, as he did, with Dougald Stewart and Sir John Whiteford, and the gentle Dr Blacklock and Mrs. Dunlop, and the good Glencairn, without adding this at least to his knowledge of life, that with the learned and great as with other folk, "the heart's aye the part aye that makes us richt or wrang." Burns knew the life of Scotland because he was part of it. He saw it whole because he saw it simply, and he gave us therefore the message not of the swelled—head, but of the swelling heart. Everything therefore expressed itself to Burns, and was expressed by him in terms not of still life but of humanity. He makes no mere apostrophies to the ocean or the mountain or the water falls. Nature speaks to him as entwined with love and friendship —

"Flow gently? sweet Afton, among thy green braes?
Flow gently I'll sing thee a song in thy praise;
My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream?
Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream".

His sea is not Byron's deep and dark blue ocean, rather it brings him some simile of love. -Music is not the rolling of the organ, but the melody of the heart. The flowers are not only beautiful to his eye, they speak to him of human loveliness:—

"My love is like a red, red rose

That's newly sprun7 in June,
My love is like a melody
That's sweetly played in tune.
Sae fair art thou, my bonnie
Sae deep in love am
And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry."

His note of war is not the clash of steel and the clatter of hoofs, but the heart which fights for freedom:—

"We will drain our dearest veins
But we shall be free."

The world to him was not a college of philosophies and theories, but a place of moving men and women whose hearts he wanted to feed with the breezes and make glad with the sight and sound of nature, and to enrich that humour of insight which is at once the fertilizer and corrective of human nature. There is nothing so rich and pervading as Burns' humour. Nothing gives a better understanding of his power. Everything he wrote, and most of what he did was simply part of his intense interest in, and through the manner of his life, all his feelings and his passion had with theirs. And so this man whose external life with his fellows, that complete union which seemed, as I have said, so far from nigh romance either of good or evil, had indeed a "passionate pilgrimage," not because he was wilfully wayward or deliberately prone to excess, but because he had the good and evil of us all, but had them with the fulness of intensity which was his in all things. Therefore, his pilgrimage awakes to-day a deeper interest than any story of the Crusades, because it is just the story of our own pilgrimage. But there were two things about Burns' journey. Like Christian in the "Pilgrim's Progress," he had good Mr. Honest to help him over the river. For no man was freer from the falseness of hypocrisy than Robert Burns. He was the Boswell of his own failings, and they are there for the world to read to-day told by himself, candidly and honestly. They did not lurk in the darkness and fester in the underworld of his soul. And so his mind moved upwards and came to fuller flower as his life went on. We are told life in Dumfries was a Gethsemane, that he deteriorated in every way, that he was cold-shouldered by respectable society, that he was "burned to a cinder." And yet; it was during this time that he wrote the most inspiring and beautiful of his songs. All the personalities of his early days, the Holy Willie and Dr Hornbrooks, and Dr Aulds, rich though they were in lashing truths, had mellowed and ripened and swelled into the fuller beauty of song. From this Dumfries period and the time just before, came the trumpet note of "Scots Wha Mae," the herald's proclamation, "A Man's a Man for a' That" - the song of humble chivalry -

'O wert thou in the cauld blast,
On yonder lea, on yonder lea,
My plaidie to the angry airt,
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee.'

That ballad of true love beginning in youth, lasting through life and carried by faith into the dim land beyond -

'John Anderson, my Jo, John,
We clamb the hill the gither,
And many a cantie day, John,
We've had wi' ane anither;

Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go
And sleep the gither at the foot,
John Anderson my Jo.

The eternal song of friendship, greater than the League of Nations:—

We'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,
For the days o' Auld Lang Syne.'

What matter all the gossiping details of whose house Burns was welcomed at, in Dumfries, or where he was not welcome, whether he was often at the Globe Inn or less often! What we do believe is that this ripened harvest of song does not come from the shrivelled and burned up earth. Burns' sowing had many tares, but the ground was in good heart, for his harvest was the golden grain, for there is nothing of great and lasting truth and beauty can come from that which is false. And indeed it is the mistakes of men which often make us love them more — Walter Scott, who, to retrieve his own mistake and maintain his financial honour toiling in sorrow and sickness to pay the last farthing; Horatio Nelson, the erring lover of Lady Hamilton, the hero whom we always place upon a high pillar looking over land and sea. Because whatever errors they made for themselves, they gave in fullest measure of their gifts which were meant for their fellows. Whether we believe in a great day of judgement or only in the judgment of distant posterity, there is in some form for all of us a great Assize, and at that great Assize what men and women will have most to answer for is the use of that which was in them for the common good. Walter Scott

Has not to account so much for his feudal vanity and to his financial mistakes, but rather whether he made "Rob Roy- and "Baillie Nicol Jarvie- and "Dominic Samson. and the rest according to the full power that was in him for the delight of the people. Nelson's responsibility is not perhaps so much for Lady Hamilton as for whether he used his genius of the sea, which we call the "Nelson Touch', for the safety of the State. To the personal faults they can only plead guilty and expect mercy, but every man is strictly responsible for his stewardship, And when Burns is called to bring his talent to the Bar, he will not bring it in a napkin, dead and unproductive, but living and growing, and bringing forth fresh fruits. Burns knew what his trust was "That I for puir auld Scotland's sake,
Some useful plan or buik could make,
Or sing a sang at least."

I am no expert in the technicalities of poetical composition, but I know enough to see from his writings themselves the intensity of his labour. They are the out-pourings of genius brought to perfection by the infinity of taking pains. We can imagine the ecstasy of his mind as his imagination glowed with poetic fire, the bewildering choice of words which came to him — and with what toil and even agony he must have brought them into discipline. Yet, hardly ever is there the out-pouring of wild and untutored thoughts. Always there is the minimum of words chosen and blended together to make the simple true and inevitable note. The language and the thought are steel true, and blade straight, made and tempered by a great artificer, and so it was by his faithful stewardship, that this man, beaten folks say, in the battle of life, yet carries the flag for us. For Nelson as he fell did not more truly die in the moment of victory, than did Robert Burns. True to the way of Burns' life, he did not fall to the sound of the guns of the fleets of two great nations, but to the ragged volleys of the awkward squad of his own townsmen. The sound of these volleys reached the little home where his loving and sorrowing Jean gave birth to a short-lived son as the husband and father was lowered into the dull earth of St. Michael's Churchyard. And so he passed over - and

the trumpets sounded on the other side. His great spirit with its message of song went forth free and is carried on wings over sea and land. He had not fought and failed. He had fought and won. The time has come, therefore, when Burns should go free of the inquisition, 'Is this world wide meeting to-night is anything more than lip service' and indeed we mean it to be something more, vastly more, then the question is not what we think of Burns, what he was or was not but what he is. Not what we think he did or did not do, but what we, the people of to-day, are doing to make fruitful the great inheritance which, with the breath of a new life, he passed on to us. Burns' temptation was not the kingdoms of the earth. These had no appeal to him. What he wanted was the Kingdom of the Heart. At the gate, there were the sirens disguised as handmaids of the heart, unlawful love and excessive good fellowship, who tempted him and he sometimes yielded, but he reached the inmost citadel and from thence he proclaims the dignity of Man because of the heart:-

'For thus the Royal Mandate ran
Since first the Human race began -
The honest, social, friendly man,
Wha'e'er he be,
'This he fulfils great Nature's plan,
And none but he'

This is not only a declaration of dignity. It is a message of healing. He has come nearer than most to healing the gaping wound which separates our higher ideals and aspirations from our daily life, that since the world began has been the trouble of all men great and small. Herbert Spencer, the great philosopher, used, they say, to haggle prices with his fishmongers Burns did not, as some of his critics say he did, come down from the hilltop to walk in the mud. Rather, he struggled through the mud and over the stones and rough places, stumbling often, falling sometimes but always helping his own and other wounded spirits upwards to the pure and healing breezes of the heights. Burns is not alone for high places and high days, but for every day and for the home

and for the burgh High Street, and for the ordinary men and women.

What then are we people of to-day doing? Are we still haggling with the fish-monger? With the shrill cries of small party tactics, of small personal victories and animosities, of small personal gains, or are we bringing to the High Streets of the land, the broad warm sympathy and humour and pity and understanding and hope of the man who, on our own High Street, fought out the stiffest part of his own life's battle and won it; who, because he won, now goes riding with his royal mandate into the far country of the distant centuries. The ending of his message is, as was in the beginning spoken not in the language of the pulpit, but in the language of the simple Scottish tongue:-

"It's comin' yet for a' that,
That man to man the warld o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that."

This, then, is a festival of faith. It is not an abstract expression, but is expressed through the life and heart of a man. Not only therefore is it, in its world wide gathering of all sorts and conditions of men, marvellous in its quantity, but it is special in its quality. For we honour no cold historical or literary memory. It has often come home to me as it has to all of you, how much people, even the least imaginative, think of Burns as a real living friend. And if he, to-night, walked down these old streets where he so often walked into this old Inn where he often came, he would come a purified Robert

Burns no doubt, but still the -wonderful ordinary man come to-speak with ordinary men — just the same Robert Burns — just the "Lad that was born in Kyle."
And with that feeling of his presence, and in that thought of him in all the fullness of its meaning we honour "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns