

Mr W J Hay IMMORTAL MEMORY (1925).

Mr Hay thanked the Chairman and members for their hearty welcome, and conveyed the fraternal greetings of the Scottish Burns Club (Edinburgh Section), of which he was vice—president. The Ninety Burns Club, the Arbroath Burns Club, and the Greater Edinburgh Club had also asked him to convey their greetings to the Howff Club. Proceeding, he told an amusing story of a commercial traveller in Perth, who had been to a Burns concert and afterwards expressed himself as puzzled because the bloke did not appear, and concluded by asking "Who is he, anyway?" There was a great deal of ignorance about Burns even amongst those who professed a knowledge of him, continued Mr. Hay. We heard nasty stories about Burns, but those critics did not seem to realise the greatness of Burns, and what he did for Scotland and the world. Wallace prepared the way for Bruce, who gave us national freedom. Looking back six centuries, we could scarcely realise the difficulties he had to fight. Sir William Wallace, John Knox and Robert Burns were three men who made Scotland famous throughout the world. In the 16th century, Knox was the instrument through which Scotland was delivered from ecclesiastical misrule. Pointing out that American freedom of to—day was based on the action of John Knox in founding the Presbyterian Church of England, out of which arose the Pilgrim Fathers, Mr. Hay went on to say that Burns was a preacher, but not in the ordinary sense. His pulpit differed from that of the Church. His place of study was the fields, the woods, and the streams of his native Ayrshire. The observations he made there, he had interwoven into much of his work. As a depicter of human character, Burns had no equal. England had Dickens, but Burns had taken all types of human character and put them on the canvas of his mind. Burns was a real democrat. He said:—"the land belongs to the people," and asked "why should these men lord it over us, and walk about in gay attire, and to please themselves, spend the thousands that we put in their pockets, through the sweat of our brows?" He asked this question, but he did not blame anyone; he did not make class hatred. What he wanted to get at was the man who did not use the material that God had given him, and from first to last he worked to that end.

The independent man, the independent thinker, the man who worked things out for himself. "The rank is but the guinea's stamp"; the real gowd was the man who acted up to the real tenor of his manhood. Burns said he felt there was a time coming when men would not only be independent, but would look upon their fellow—men as brothers. He was the great apostle of manhood, suffrage and brotherhood. Proceeding, the speaker dealt with Burns' preparation for his great work. His father from the Glenbervie district of Mearns, worked for Mr. Hope of Hope Park, now the East Meadows of Elinburgh, and some of the trees he planted were still there. His father had Jacobite leanings, and his mother, a Brown of Priesthill, was of good old Covenanting stock. His father's interest in his son's education, the part of John Murdoch the teacher, and Burns' work on the farm were all outlined, as was also the episode that led to Burns writing "Handsome Hell," and the part the debating society at Kirkoswald played in Burns' education was indicated. Peggy Thomson first roused Burns' roused Burns' genius. He saw her one day in her garden — their eyes met, and his head was turned. So bad, in fact, that Burns could not work for a week, and went home. He wrote a song about Peggy Thomson, and that song still exists. It was a curious thing said Mr. Hay, that while there had been many a poet able to rhyme, there had never been a great poet

until he was touched with the love light. Burns' life at Lochlea and Mossgiel were given in detail, and Mr. Hay showed the home influence on the Poet's after work. The habits of his father's life and his father's household impressed him very much. Sceptical though he might sometimes be, we always went back to the time when he saw his father take down "the big ha' bible" and wail a portion with care at family worship. That family worship, Burns carried on into his own house.

Burns owed a lot to Freemasonry. He joined Lodge St. David in 1783 at Tarbolton, and on a split taking place, he hived off with Lodge St. James, and rose to be Depute Master in 1785 — 1786. He was constantly writing, and in the Lodge he had a fine field for his work. The speaker believed that Burns' poems might never have seen the light of day, but for the encouragement received from the members of Lodge St. David. Touching on some of the work doubtless produced for some of the Lodge harmonies, Mr. Hay mentioned "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Address to the Unco Guid." There he was, taking a type of man who was a disgrace to society, any society, far less a church. Such men we could meet to—day, but we met them to—day with the spirit of Burns.

Relating the story of Burns' dog going in to a dance, and the Poet saying as he took it out, "I wish I could find a lassie that would lo'e me as well as my dog." The speaker told of Jean Armour- asking him next day if he had found such a person, and how this led up to the pair having to get a certificate of marriage. This was signed by two witnesses, and could not be annulled as easily as Jean Armour's father thought. His wrath and his actions against Burns were recounted, also Burns' action in going off and finding- Highland Mary and plighting his troth to her. His decision to go to Jamaica, the printing of the Kilmarnock edition of his poems, Dr Blacklock's favourable opinion which decided him to stay, and then Highland Mary's sudden death at Greenock, were also recounted.

Then Burns set off for Edinburgh, he had in his pocket a document declaring him to be a bachelor — having paid penance in the ordinary way. The speaker dealt with the Poet's stay in the town with John Richmond, a clerk of Gavin Hamilton's, and his attendance at the St. Andrew's Festival. In his "Address to the Haggis," he said in one line — "Your very pin would mend a mill." there was only one restaurant that made haggis like that — they were of bullock's stomachs with a pin to hold by. The poem to the haggis was published within ten days of the St. Andrew's Festival. Going on to speak of Burns in Edinburgh, the speaker told how Burns was lifted to the highest pinnacles of society, and then he turned his back on it. Why? Because, said Mr. Hay, Burns felt he had work to do, and that his work could not be done in the atmosphere of a lionising society. This renunciation was the greatest thing in Burns' life. Many a man could climb the ladder, but few could come down gracefully. And so we got Burns at Ellisland and what wonderful work he had done. People talked about Burns' life in Dumfries being a disgrace, but did they know he wrote 400 songs? No nation had such a collection of songs from one man, and it would be many a day before any nation could turn out songs of such quality. One song, the very best literary and musical men acknowledged to be the finest song ever written — that was "Ae Fond Kiss." There was a tragedy in that song. That was the tragedy of Burns and Clarinda. Clarinda was a grass widow, a cousin of Lord Craig.

They had fallen deeply in love, and from her he learned he was not a free man, but that the marriage with Jean Armour still held. She had consulted Lord Craig and he

said it held. It was Clarinda who sent back Burns to cherish Jean Armour, and for her kind offices, we owed her a place in Burnsiana second to none. Although Jean Armour was much to Burns, the Poet was much more to her. He was much more her life than she was his. Beautiful songs he had written round his Bonnie Jean, but there was none of them that touched the chord of "Had we never loved sae kindly." Burns' renunciation was one of the finest things in his character, and while in Dumfries, the speaker knew from evidence that, notwithstanding the diatribes that had been said about him, he was true to his duty, never absent, and every week doing his 200 miles and sometimes more, till the . last few weeks. He was a very abstemious man, a take it or leave it man, and knew when he had had enough. His very glass was preserved in that house. It was not a very big one, and he rarely had it replenished.

Burns belonged to the world. He was as much to America, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and other Dominions as he was to people here. He was a poet at heart. He revealed man in the inward parts, and next to the Psalm of David, there was no higher or holier poetry than one found in the poetry of Burns.

I give you Robert Burns.