

REV JOHN NIVISON, ORKNEY -- IMMORTAL MEMORY (1926 )

Once more the Globe Hotel, Dumfries, where Burns himself so often foregathered with his cronies, re-echoed with the songs he sang and the sentiments he so well uttered. The occasion was the anniversary dinner of the Howff Club, which amongst ion of such a note, and all was this year the attention all dinners most nearly approaches in atmosphere, the general concept- gathering in Burns' day. Hearty good fellowship was the prevailing the songs and speeches were imbued with it. The toast of the evening entrusted to the Rev. John Nivison, Orkney, who throughout gripped of his audience by the originality of his address, and delighted all

his delivery in the Lowland tongue and his use of the Doric.

Mr. Nivison introduced several original poems into his oration, and in proposing "The Immortal Memory," he said:- I cannot voice my sense of the honour that is mine as I stand before you now. In life, many events, experiments and conditions seem to be the natural product of plans and effort, and we take the expected as our due, but, on the other hand, the realisation of desire and the fruition of hope are, at times, so little short of marvellous that we must pause and wonder. In life, I have had two great sources or inspiration - my Bible and my Burns. A minister is chiefly concerned with (1) the Bible and what it reveals, and (2) man and what he conceals. A proper understanding of our fellows (a profitable factor in every vocation) may be denied to lesser minds, and is supplied by the expert. The blunted darts of truth are sharpened in the workshop of the genius and the humble workman essays his task with new hope of success. In life, apart from my profession, and yet linked with it, I have had three great ambitions. The first was to be a student at Oxford, and the second was to see the Holy Land - Palestine. The first, perhaps ability, or its lack, precluded; the second certainly circumstances prevented, and yet they have come to pass. During the Great War, I was posted, as a cadet, to Baliol-College, Oxford. My early ambition did not include military tactics and King's Regulations, but there I was, where desire had often turned. Four of us shared a room within the old quadrangle - one was an Episcopalian, one was a Roman Catholic, one was a Methodist, and one was a Scottish Presbyterian. A more varied company you could not find, but a common instinct dwarfed sectarianism and united in a common cause. When argument seemed to induce disruption, one would point to the wall above the mantelpiece. On the table before me, these initials were cut, "R. A.", and exactly opposite were these others, "S. B.". One day a hoary janitor explained to me that they signified Raymond Asquith and Stanley Baldwin, and, above the mantelpiece, framed in empty match boxes, was a card bearing these words:-

"Then let us pray, that come it may -

As come it will for a' that,

That sense and worth, ower a' the earth,

Shall bear the gree an' a' that.

For a' that an' a' that,

It's comin, yet for ' that -

For man tae man, the warl' ower,

Shall brithers be for a' that."

After spending two months with the 3rd Battalion of the King's Owns Scottish Borderers, I was posted to the 5th battalion, then operating somewhere south of Gaza, on the confines of the Holy Land, and I proceeded to the realisation of my second great ambition. In the spring of the year, when the rains are sudden and heavy out there, I was camped with a detachment on the banks of a wady. Our cookhouse — that is, our dixie and two large stones — and our daily rations were bestowed down in the wady. One morning the weather was fine, but after breakfast, clouds, increasingly large and black, crossed the sky and poured out their contents. The cook had set dinner in preparation, and fled to his bivvy for shelter. The rain continued and increased. A rumbling as of distant thunder was heard, and every bivvy was closed. The swish and surge of waters, like the Nith over the rocks at Auldgirth, and a roar like the Caul, fell upon our ears, and soon cries rang throughout the camp:— "The cookhouse, boys:" Where lately was a dry/sandy gully, now a turbid torrent raged, a reckless scavenger in its course. Disappointment and anger were turned upon the hapless cook, and mere threats of extermination were as the perfume of roses upon the dunghill. Amidst the desolation, distress, and darkling vows, a voice sang out from a bivvy near, "Flow gently, sweet Afton, amang thy green braes." It was sweet to hear that song of peace; it was good to hear that hubbub cease. Angry feelings were suppressed, reviling changed to laughter, a silence fell upon the camp, and these words stole softly through the orange grove:—

"There daily I wander as noon rises high,

My flocks and my Mary's sweet cot in my eye."

"It heezed us abune yon sark scrimpet auld yirtn,

An' brocht us strecht aff tae the lan' o' oor birth.

it crap bin oor herts, an' sae loosened oor tongue,

We a' were guid frien's when "Sweet Afton" was sung."

I resolved to relate this incident if ever my third great ambition should be realised, and that ambition has been to stand where I am tonight. Ambitions are not the offspring of ability, nor are honours the proof of merit. If the ideal is worthy its realisation is weighted with responsibility, hence I am conscious of my unfitness to submit this toast to you who are stooped in the lore of Burns and votaries at his shrine. If I have departed from the usual course in introducing my subject, will you kindly accept the digression as part of the tribute I am ever ready to pay to him whose birth we commemorate, whose worth we celebrate, and whose memory we immortalise.

"For the soul of fair Coila was stirring our hearts when we worsted the foe in these drear, foreign parts. Our Patriot Poet fired each man with an aim, and we voiced it together in — "Scotland and hame."

Coming more directly to our subject, I should be without excuse or hope of forgiveness, particularly in Dumfries, if I make reference to the articles that appeared in the "Glasgow Herald" contributed by Sir James Crichton—Browne. The eulogies of laymen have too often been considered the exaggerated vapouring or unreasoning enthusiasts, whom cynics sourly dispose of thus — "Birds of a leather flock together." But Burns now stands before the world vindicated by one who has staked his reputation on his manly argument. Any commentary would detract from his masterly defence, any addition would be an insult to intelligence, but this we may humbly say — No finer contribution has come from tongue or pen than this from Sir James Crichton—Browne. If Dumfries failed in her appreciation of and attitude towards Robert Burns, the gauger poet, Dumfries has nobly atoned through one of her most illustrious sons. I think the Burns' Federation should ask Sir James to accept an address of gratitude, not as something distinct among his many honours, but as a mark of our indebtedness.'

"Had we twa braiths o' Rabbies's Muse,

Oor sang wad pruiwe hoo we enthuse,

Sic dunts he's gien dispairgint crews,

We canna streen it,

The new licht's lunt a gey carouse —

Sober, we meant it.

Hail, stalwart, fan—found, honoured Sir! Ye've roosed us wi' an unco birr,

Your pen has scartit oot that slur,

Oor herts embrace ye.

Amang the best, braw wings tae whirr,

May Heevin place ye.

Fare forth, fair soul; ower lan' an' sea

The warl esteems your victory.

Neter socht ye fause or feart tae 'gree, Sae dinna bide ye.

The race is loupin noo tae gie ye

What whids denied ye."

"My Immortal Memory" — the subject is so complex and comprehensive, approached from different points of view,-it would require a highly—developed, composite mind to detach the various elements in the psychological structure of Robert Burns.

We are allowed to ask — why at all — and why Immortal? There must be some abiding quality and some universal property in the man, and his message to men, before we dare propose the toast which subordinates all others. We find this quality and this property in the man himself. His writings were the natural, necessary overflow of his soul. His message was the sincere expression of actual states, conditions, conceptions and aspirations of his own soul, which find a responsive chord in every human heart. He was no charlatan or mountebank — a wordy trickster, practising to beguile — a pretender in the most sacred things the heart of man can know. Abandoning himself vastly, as only genius can, in the interests of his fellow—men, he passes through the crucible of his brain all the pangs and joys, the dread and hope, that we are heir to, and pours forth the advice of a sage, and the song of the Universal Lover. Wherein lies his claim to perpetual remembrance? We find that he is the great interpreter of the universal human heart. We think his nature was unique, and the world is wise to recognise this nature and his extraordinary endowment. He is not one in a thousand — he is the only one, and we reverence him because he stands alone. We cannot otherwise explain his remarkable influence upon men and the spell of fascination he casts over them. By his peculiar constitution, not physical, but mental and spiritual — that is, the complete inner being of the man — he was able to gather up in himself and realise and express all our varied and ever—varying states and emotions, and with matchless sympathy make them his own, not in pretence, but what is more poignant and penetrating, in his great, yearning, sensitive heart. As the poet—king of Israel has immortalised in song the unchanging need aspiration of mankind, so that all generations most fitly make him their pattern in confession and adoration, so our Poet, no less surely and in the same degree, has interpreted and voiced the quivering heart of man. The great quest of the ages is for harmony, within and around, harmony complete and secure, not so much a product as a condition, when the true music of life in thought, purpose, action and environment is not made possible, as a streamlet after rain, but is the actual, abiding, essential disposition whence all sweetness flows, as a well on a hill, drawing its supplies from the rocks distributes riches naturally. This harmony, representing a universal condition of rightness, where all things would be self—explanatory and mutually serviceable, was the great problem for Burns himself, and the multiplied vibrations in men and nature converge and unite in that responsive heart. Like the prophets, his message was as a fire in his bones or as a burden upon his soul, the occasion of it crushing out the life that ought to be possible for men, hence identifying himself, through his incomparable sympathy, with those in society, or that order in nature that suffered through the lack of the harmony which was the dearest and most elevated concept of his enlightened spirit, he breathed his comfort, patience and hope, or let loose such fires of satire as had never scorched the hard hide or veneer of oppressor or pretender. Honestly and humbly acknowledging his imperfections, there was the constant struggle, out and up, where he might breathe a purer air and escape the contagion and entanglements that so affected that so affected and enmeshed him. The very conditions in which he lived had effect peculiar to his temperament and idea of perfect life, and he saw with clearer vision that many principles determining men's practices and fellowship must be changed before a social and industrial order could be introduced where every talent would be exercised and every man would be free. Amidst participation in the social round there is a soul writhing for emancipation, not in solitary state but to be enjoyed by all created things His groping restlessness is not wholly on his own account but for the general system of things, that such an order may be evolved as will enable man and nature to fulfil their glorious destiny. His magnanimity is an inspiration, as he yearns fiercely for that appropriateness or proportion in life when every grace may be exhibited and every faculty may show complete development along the highest lines. It requires genius to interpret genius, and it

requires a poet to understand a poet. I cannot claim the qualification. We know there must be conformity to certain rules of speech and cadence which we all may recognise, but this is purely external, merely the vehicle and mode of expression, and deeper than this is the Soul of the poet, with its concept, emotion and aspiration. Music is of the soul. Poetry is articulated music. As only the master—musician can perfectly comprehend the suggestion and finesse of a masterpiece, because the same element is present in both so it requires kindred sense to appreciate fully the subtlety of poetic offering. We may not soar to poetic heights and linger till our soul is saturated with the atmosphere, so that we enter with complete, intelligent sympathy into all his moods and strivings, emotions and heart—longings, but

"We are all trudging on the way of life,

Bent with our burdens, and wearied with strife

Not only with men, but ourselves and God,

And nature appears in whimsical mood.

—

At times we are fain to cease toil — and rest;

But life's gift to each is unending quest.

Hence, forward we press through riot of mind,

Hope leading us out when darkest confined.

As fragments show how rich the feast may be,

Each scrap received foretells grand harmony.

Forward or back, which way our spirit turns,

A mentor wise we find in Robert Burns."

His survey embraced creation — mankind and nature — in every state and mood. Man passes under review, in the home, in the field, at work, at play, in quiet communing with himself, and in the hour of social intercourse, and every trait or sentiment is marked off with expert exactness. And Nature, wanton or subdued, storm—wracked or in repose, has an irresistible call for him.

"O: Nature ; A' thy shaws an' forms

Tae feelin', pensive herts hae charms

Whether the simmer kindly warms

Wi' life an' licht,

Or winter howls, in gusty storms

The lang, dark nicht.

We have not a jumble of rambling statements, unprofitable because inapplicable. We too have sought the busy haunt, or solace in seclusion, and in all his observations he moralises towards true philosophy. In jingling rhyme and happy song, in the soul's long—drawn, lamenting sigh and the fervour of his love's ecstasy, we have such a miscellany of truth as no other combines with the purest music of speech. By his profound understanding, simple tenderness, and overflowing sympathy, he has established himself as the companion of every soul that still reveres life's sacred things, and yearns for the day of love's revealing, when everything sordid will be shamed, and every discord will cease. He sings, if not of Heaven, then, which is more Christlike, of a heavenly state on earth, will be realised, and the song of angels will be translated into human speech. As a discord distresses a conductor — although it might pass unnoticed by the audience — Burns has brought into bolder relief the existing imperfections in man's economy, and their irradiated reflection on nature, in contemplation of which the keenest agony wrings his heart. There is a unity in the poet's conception of existing things, a lack or a law affecting the minutest detail. So clear is the understanding kinship acquires, he mourns the disturbance man's dominion has wrought in Nature's social union, and, forgetting personal ills when a winter storm is raging, he thinks upon "the corie cattle, or silly sheep, wha bide the brattle o' winter war, and through the drift, deep—lairin', sprattle beneath a scaur." How tender is the heart, how pure is the sentiment, how deep is the pathos when he acknowledges a debt in this concern:—

"Ilk happin' bird, wee helpless thing,

That in the merry months o' spring

Delighted me tae hear thee sing,

What comes o' thee?

Whare wilt thou co'er thy chitterin' wing

An' close thy e'e

His misery as not assumed. He was too honest to promise improvement if God forgave, remembering that they "who sin so oft have mourned, yet to temptation ran." Striving to restore the lost balance of mutual trust, such sympathy as his cries for recognition and a kindred understanding in Nature.

Lavishing his pity on Nature's weaklings and condemning man's abuses, he cries for fellowship in his loneliness and some pity for his distress.—

"Thou'lt break my hert, thou warblin' bird,

That wantons through the flo'erin' thorn

Thou minds me O' departed joys —

Departed never tae return."

Have we not trod the rough and lonely paths, where every note of Nature's mirth raised discard in our heart? In the darkest, most abandoned hour, we feel our poet near us, breathing hope into laden hearts till our sigh becomes a song. Out flowing sympathy does not perfectly relieve from trouble. He turns from these objective sources of sorrow and proofs of the unrightness of things to his own peculiar need and condition as a man. More sentient and responsible, man's must be a deeper concern. Nature's ills death can heal, but to the mouse, which he pities in the cranreuch cauld, he says:—

"Still thou art blessed compared wi' me;

The present only touches thee.

But och: I backward cast my e'e

On prospects drear.

An forrit, though I canna see,

I guess an' fear."

Confessing his limitations, still philosophising, he carries us with him to the very centre of the shadow. Frequent trial in the art of living a life, a variety of attempts to solve the problem, continued yearning for the enthronement of love as the world's great renewer, throw him back on self with keener disappointment and a feeling that all is lost:—

"But och: mankind are unco weak,

An' little tae be trusted.

If self the waverin' balance shake,

'Tis rarely richt adjusted."

More clearly than ever he realises, and more plainly he declares, that man is the guilty agent, and man's devices kill. His wrath is against estrangement as a principle, which floods the world with its attendant ills. Narrowing the scope of living interest, the field of selfish interest is enlarged till all the pursuits of men are affected, and each becomes a nursery of envy's evil progeny. Man must look beyond himself for the glory of existence; he must enlist another's powers by the winning proof of Brotherhood. Here the deepest feeling of his heart is stirred; each chord seems heaven—touched. In sentiment and expression he ranks with the prophets whose visions still inspire. We are so strangely knit together, why should men divide? In life, we heir past error's fruits, and we, too, err in living; and causing fellow—men to err, can God still be forgiving? The bleakness of the prospect and man's part in the ruin wrought are announced in this summation:—

"Many and sharp the numerous ills

Inwoven with our frame.

More pointed still we make ourselves

Regret, remorse, and shame.

And man, whose heaven—erected face

The smiles of love adorn —

Man's inhumanity to man

Makes countless thousands mourn."

The whole philosophy of our social system is compressed into this gem of love and poetry, and while many flippantly quote the indictment as an excuse for some new offence, its urgency for practical recognition is winning wider acknowledgement, and we believe that the spirit that gave the thought, the courage, and the word, will accomplish in men what the bard so ardently desired. He is no dignified, detached, professional preceptor, but a wayfarer on life's road, joining company with every degree and pedigree, pointing Heaven's claim in every opportunity, and a lesson in every circumstance. He would plant, in every human heart, the very love of Heaven, that sweetness may flow from every tongue, and kindness from every hand — that earth itself may lose its opportunity, since every heart would be God— inspired, and every niche love—filled. Though failing to attain, he manifests and inculcates the spirit through which we may attain; and see, far off, but coming, man's Paradise regained. His contemporaries looked upon him as a prodigy, but so new was the man, so soulful was his work, so lofty was his ideal, they turned from him as a roguish rhymster who fondled Fancy's fleeting form, forgetting that custom is akin to law, and social proprieties supplant religion. Religion: at the very mention of the word, the whole soul of Burns was fired, and here, perhaps, our reverence for the man is deepest, and our attachment is closest. Shams and travesties he spurned, but, given the genuine article, none had sincerer praise or deeper reverence. No word against religion was spoken by him, but all the powers of mind and soul were summoned to extol the devout worshipper. Recalling the Cottar in his home, living again these pure—hearth. scenes, with rapture he exclaims:—

"From scenes like these, auld Scotia's grandeur springs,

That makes her loved at home, revered abroad:

Princes and lords are but the breath of kings —

An honest man's the noblest work of God."





Failing to achieve, pressing forward, conscious of fault, but also of good intent, he begs forbearance with his fall and remembrance of his virtues in these words which condemn the censorious, and which alone would have made him a poet worthy of commemoration:—

"Who made the heart, 'tis He alone

Decidedly can try us.

He knows each chord, its various tone —

Each spring, its various bias.

Then at the balance let's be mute:

We never can adjust it.

What's done, we partly may compute,

But know not what's resisted."

No mother ever pleaded more wisely, more lovingly, or more pathetically with a head-strong, wayward child, and as we listen to his words, we know life is not all lost in failure; we lift our heads again, not in smug complacency, but thrilled with a new inspiration, believing that:-

"Early a douce fu' fawsont chief?

Taigled wi' cantraips o' the De 'ii

Comes fechin' intae Heevin's bield,

An' gets his fairin'.

The Love that plans, an' aye daes weel,

Is unco sparin'."

Misunderstood, unappreciated, often in the sorest straits, he sang out, to generations unborn, the rules of a perfect order and the peace of upright man. Our ceremony is a farce, and our toast becomes an insult, if we do not strive towards his ideal, and daily brighten a vice-darkened world with some ray of love's light that will soften the hardest, gladden the saddest, raise the lowest, and reveal the open gates of Paradise. Those who do not understand, or, understanding, are condemned, may say this is idealism, and is not fitted for a world or time when men are so strenuously engaged with the realities of life, that there is no time or opportunity for living ideally. The ideal must ever be the most sacred reality to the faithful aspirant. Every prophet and teacher of the race is an idealist. Idealism is the salvation of the world, and gratefully, reverently, we would keep the memory of our Poet green, because, while uttering the inmost, deepest need and longing of our being, he calls to fields of service and heights of bliss, which, by the very demand of our soul, must become experience. He was so much in advance of his time, even yet, we have not come into line. He lingers for us, far ahead, shedding a bright and guiding light, till his and our ideal is realised.

Such a man is a gift of God to the race - and this generation's acknowledgement of his worth is one of the most hopeful signs and proofs of the world's recrudescence. Granted more of his spirit, more of that love which lived for country, goodness, and mankind, we should witness such preparedness as required only the spiritual contact of that Higher Supreme Power (Whom he was always mindful to adore) to flash upon a waiting world the glory the prophets foretold. Then surely the bridegroom would lead forth his bride, very pleasant and fair to see. Only as we are faithful do we complete his mission - an unloving toast is a double transgression.

"Though praises flow from facile tongue:

When memory guards her secret throne,

In silence sweetest songs are sung,

With love the vibrant undertone."

Not by my presentation of Robert Burns, but because of his own peerless position and worth, I Pledge your reverence and the world's indebtedness in "His Immortal Memory"