

RT. HON. THOMAS JOHNSTON — IMMORTAL MEMORY. (1946).

The Right Hon. Thomas Johnston, P. C., former Secretary of State for Scotland, was the principal guest of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club and proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the annual dinner of the club held in the Globe Inn, Dumfries, last night. There was a gathering of over a hundred members and friends, and the proceedings throughout were of the enjoyable character always associated with the functions of the Howff.

Mr. Johnston delivered a most interesting address in submitting the toast. He said in the course of his speech that a great and enduring reason why the people of Burns's race should continue to meet once a year and commemorate their supreme Scots genius and give thanks for their heritage, was that so long as they had pride in their common stock, and for so long as they cherished the ballads and the old speech that they first heard at their mother's knees, then, whatever else betide, they should survive in the world and overcome all the dangers and difficulties that beset them. Mr. Johnston made an appeal for support for the printing and publication of the Scots National Dictionary, for which anything up to 220,000 would be required by the Burns Federation to see the work completed.

In proposing the toast of "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns," Mr. Johnston said:— There have been a century and a half or thereby of Immortal Memory orations. The genius of Robert Burns has been translated into every major and most minor languages under the sun. Learned professors have explained him and analysed him in a thousand university class rooms. His great song of fealty and friendship, "Auld Lang Syne," is

in universal vogue. The peasant gauger who died here in your Mill Vennel at the age of 37 lives securely a century and a half after his death in the melodies of the world.

Anything worth saying about him has been repeatedly and better said than I can reach within my compass to—night. But there is indeed a great and enduring reason why we of his race should continue to meet once a year to toast and commemorate our supreme Scots genius and give thanks for our heritage in him. It is this, that so long as we have pride in common stock, and for so long as we thrill and tingle at the singing of "Scots wha hae," for so long as we cherish the ballads and the old speech that we first heard at our mother's knee, then, whatever else betide, we shall survive in the world and over-

come all the dangers and difficulties that beset us. We hear much about internationalism

these days, but the word itself means "between nations" and presupposes, therefore, the existence of the nations. It does not mean that we here in Scotland should seek to marry our daughters to Australian bushmen, or sing "Scots wha hae" in Esperanto, or wipe out our national boundaries and become only an area or a region charted so many degrees in latitude

or longitude from the North Pole or the Equator. It simply means that the nations have each some quality they can contribute to the common heritage of mankind and that we can all brithers be, and live in amity to our common profit and well—being, if we will it. Robert Burns was in the direct line of the inspirers of our folk. There was in that chain the unknown penman who drafted the declaration of the hurried Convention at Arbroath, in April, 1320. A few of us still remember the time when we were fortunate to have a teacher at school who stirred us to better conduct, as he related the story of how the English King had been endeavouring to induce the Pope - John xxii - to excommunicate King Robert the Bruce. Excommunication was a frightful sentence in the 14th century; and it was the dignity and determination of the Scots reply that still

stirs our veins. Through Robert the Bruce, said the Arbroath declaration (I quote the late Professor Hannay's transcription) , we had been saved from English dominance: "Yet were he to abandon the enterprise begun, choosing to subject us or our Kingdom to the King of the English or to the English people, we should strive to thrust him out forthwith as our enemy and the subverter of right, his own and ours, and to take for our King another who might suffice for our defence, for so long as an hundred of us remain alive we are minded never a whit to bow beneath the yoke of English dominance. It is not for glory, riches or honours that we fight: it is for liberty alone, the liberty which no good man relinquishes but with his life." And right down through Bannockburn, and Burns's immortal battle ode about it, right down to to-day to the struggle for Prestwick, the line holds true; and we have Robert Burns to thank in large measure for the preservation of our distinctive language - he transmitted it through his songs - and for the pride in our Scots tradition and achievement, and for the determination of Scots folk to persist as an entity in the world, which pride is often in itself an inspiration to good citizenship and good comradeship. It was surely no ignoble yearning that was embodied in the lines:-

"That I for poor auld Scotland's sake,
Some useful plan or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least.,,

And if the spirit of Robert Burns hovers over our gathering to-night, as I speak these words, it will, I firmly believe, be in accord and sympathy with our claim as we appeal for support in the printing and publication of our Scots National Dictionary. Anything up to £20,000, I am told, will be required by the

Burns Federation to see the work completed. E.1 from every 250 of us - or a penny a head. And there is another good Scots historical subject to which I would fain draw public attention. It is the shameful state of our public records. How, for example, do our high legal authorities in Scotland explain or justify the fact that since 1542 -that is over 400 years - the Records of the Court of Session are unedited and unindexed? Many of these records are colourful, and are informative of our history. Some of the case papers, I believe, have valuable, indeed priceless, documents attached to them. The records of the English High Court - Chancery and Common Pleas - are indexed; why should our Scots records and so much of our history remain unknown and lie in our Register House in manuscript form? Then there are the Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer for 68 years after the Reformation, still unpublished. There are also unpublished the Register of the Privy Council for the 27 years before the Union of Parliaments; the Acts of the Lords of Council for 88 years; the Register of Deeds since 1552 - almost carries "an inexhaustible store of information about the private life of our forefathers." The Register of the Great Seal is unpublished for nearly 300 years, and the Register of the Privy Seal for 350 years. I believe two volumes of the Accounts of the Masters of Works in Scotland, between 1530 and 1707, which throw light upon our economic history, are in preparation, under the editorship of Dr MacKay MacKenzie. But what pride or interest in our history do we take, when we have to admit that the grant for the issue of Scottish Record publications was reduced to £200 per annum in 1923, and still remains at that figure.

One of my greatest treasures is Burns's snuff mull, given me by Sir Henry Fildes, until recently M. P. for the County of Dumfries. It had been carefully cherished in Sir Henry's family since the time when one of his ancestors nursed Jean

Armour in her last illness, and was presented by Mrs. Burns with the trinket. It is a simple ram's horn holder, but a beautiful piece of workmanship - not for sale to any

collectors, home or transatlantic, I hasten to add — but I like to think that it may have been passed around by the poet here in the Globe Hotel, where we are now assembled. I cannot give you a "sneesh" from his mull, but I will pass around to—night for your inspection photostat copies never yet published, of the Records of Customs and Excise showing the poet's handwriting and his vouchers for his expense accounts. You will observe, too, except for the last shaky signature on July 14th with the blot, when he was obviously dying, the evidence of confident penmanship. Jean Armour's signature, too, you will see, signing for the balance of her husband's salary to the 21st, "on which day he died." You will observe, too, that his salary for the fortnight before he died, was £1 — 10 — 8 1/4d. Burns was the supreme artist — the fashioner of images, the creator of pictures in the poetry of words. Take, for instance, his masterly, indeed inimitable, painting of the close of a winter's day in an old Scots burgh:

"When Chapman billies leave the street
An' drouthy neebors, neebors meet,
As market days are wearin' late,
And folk begin tae tak' the gate,
While we sit bousing at the nappy,
An' getting fou and unto happy."

The late Dr Wallace, editor of the "Glasgow Herald," who published a four volume edition of the Poet's work, declared that Burns was "a man of the most powerful, penetrating; and original understanding" — and that he was "the first man of letters of his day." And Thomas Carlyle gave it as his considered opinion that "no other man was so well entitled to be at the head of public affairs of his day."

Remember, too, that "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Jolly Beggars" were written when he was 26;

"The Cottar's Saturday Night" when he was 27. And he died at the same age as Jesus of Nazereth died, 37. What splendours of the human mind might we not have inherited had Burns lived to the allotted span. But then you will remember how so much of the great achievements of man have been carried through in the twenties and thirties of life. William Wallace was in command of our Scottish National Army of liberation, while still in his twenties. Napoleon was in command of the French Army in Italy at 27.

James Watt invented his steam engine process at 29. The Kilmarnock edition was published when Burns was 27. He is the fount where we all dip our ladles, the inspiration to us all, from the belted earl, the Laird of Dalmeny, the Prime Minister, down to the cadger on the highway. Indeed, at the Burns Centenary in 1896, no more forceful and eloquent tribute to our great brother's memory was paid than that by a townsman of my own, James M. Sliman, who pretended he was writing from a poorhouse. Mr. Johnston concluded by quoting some stanzas from Sliman's poem.