

W. MONTGOMERIE IMMORTAL MEMORY (1950).

"No great poet, and least of all the greatest, has ever been completely original," said Mr. W. Montgomerie, the editor of "The Robert Burns Chronicle," when he proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the 62nd anniversary dinner of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club in the Globe Inn on Wednesday evening. Robert Burns was the last and greatest of a long line of Scottish poets, all of whom made use of the work of their predecessors.

In the course of his address Mr. Montgomerie said:— I was reading a book on how language began, and found that one way to answer that question is to consider the difference between an animal and a man. An animal does not speak and a man does. And an animal and a man have different relationships towards time and space. Fascinating though they were, I have no intention of describing the learned professor's arguments any further. For Robert Burns said almost the same thing in a poem we all know, "To a Mouse." You see, Robert Burns was thinking about the same question, "How does a

man differ from a mouse?" Here is part of his answer:—

"Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' me:

The present only toucheth thee;

But, Och: I backward cast my e'e

On prospects drear:

An' forward, tho I canna see,

I guess an' fear:"

The life of an animal is in a very small circle of here and now. The memory of a mouse can go no further back than its birth, and for a mouse there can be no future. On the other hand, man has added to his own individual memory everything that his fellow men

have recorded in oral tradition, in writing, and in print. Within the immortal memory of man

is all time past throughout the whole universe. The future, too, is something of which we are becoming more and more aware. Just now this is adding to our unhappiness. It is the price we pay for not being animals. Part of that privilege takes a very curious form. If there appeared among field mice a singing mouse, as great a genius among mice as Robert Burns was among men, that genius of a mouse would be forgotten among field mice after one generation. If there had been a genius among the skylarks even ten years ago, that skylark poet would now be forgotten by the skylarks. Mice and skylarks have no immortal memory. That is a privilege we have because we are human.

There are many Scotsmen who are quite content to confine their reading of poetry to the poems of Robert Burns. Unfortunately, they know not the Robert Burns whom only Burns himself knew. From the vantage point of 1950, we are able to look further into the past than Burns could see, just as if we are climbing the hill of time, and the higher we climb the farther back we can see into the past. We are more aware nowadays of the poets who wrote before the Reformation. We also know more about the folk,-

songs the people of Scotland created before Robert Burns was born, that the people of Scotland were singing during Burns's own lifetime. The nineteenth century romantics created a

false cult of originality . But no great poet, and least of all the greatest, has ever been completely original. Robert Burns was the last and greatest of a long line of Scottish

poets, all of whom made use of the work of their predecessors. To show this is one of the steps towards proving that Robert Burns, like the other great poets of the world, was a traditional poet, and not just a human freak, appearing for no reason and disappearing into the dark. If Scottish poetic genius had been summed up in Burns, there would be no hope of another Scottish poet. There is hope in the fact that Robert Burns was the last of a line of lesser poets. Poetic genius was scattered in varying degree among many poets, which makes it possible that we may again have a great poet in Scotland. It would help greatly, if we knew as clearly as possible some of the conditions that produced Robert Burns. It is not altogether a mystery. But it might hinder the appearance of another great poet if we have illusions about how he appeared, and a pessimistic attitude towards the possibility of another poet.

To help clear our minds of illusions, and find out the truth about Robert Burns the poet, is the job of Scottish critics. The first necessity is a good magazine in which to write clearly about Robert Burns, his predecessors, the conditions under which he wrote, the language he used, and the way he used it. We must not assume anything too early without sufficient proof. We must not even assume in advance that the next

great Scottish poet will write in Scots. He might use English. From the vantage point of the year 1950, we can see something even stranger than Burns's past. We can also see a century and a half of his future. Robert Burns died in 1796, and from the point of view of the late eighteenth century we are living in the future. We are able to look back at Robert Burns's future, a century and a half of it, and that is a great privilege.

It has been pointed out with truth how little the poet Burns influenced the poetic future of his country. In Scotland, the Burns stanza has not been used again as Burns used it, and as it had been used by lesser men before it was appropriated by Robert Burns.

The only poet I can think of who, since Robert Burns, has used the Burns stanza supremely well, is William Wordsworth, the English poet, the centenary of whose death is being celebrated this year. He wrote two poems in the Burns stanza about Burns.

The first is "At the Grave of Burns, seven years after his death." The other is called "Thoughts suggested the day following, on the banks of the Nith, near the poet's residence." In the first of them, William Wordsworth makes a most significant statement, which I would like to quote:—

I mourned with thousands, but as one
More deeply grieved, for he was gone
Whose light I hailed, when first it shone,
And showed my youth

How Verse may build a princely throne
In humble truth.

Now this is a rather remarkable statement. It suggests that Robert Burns was a very important early influence on the first great poet of the nineteenth century in England.

One American critic was very puzzled by this solitary reference to Burns's influence on Wordsworth's poetry, but searched in vain for a further acknowledgement in Wordsworth's long poem, "The Prelude: or Growth of a Poet's Mind." No

acknowledgement was needed, for with a knowledge of Burns's poetry, it is easy to see in the famous "Preface" which Wordsworth wrote in 1800, that William Wordsworth described in the verse he himself wrote, the very qualities we find in the poems of Burns. It is appropriate on this anniversary to connect together the poet whose centenary is going to be celebrated in 1950 and Robert Burns. For years they were near neighbours, William Wordsworth in north England in the Lake District, and Robert

Burns here in Dumfries. William Wordsworth regretted that they had never met, and wrote:—

"The tear will start, and let it flow;
Thou "poor inhabitant below,"
At this dread moment — even so —
Might we together
Have sate and talked where gowans blow,
Or on wild heather.
What treasures would have then been placed
Within my reach of knowledge graced
By fancy what a rich repast."

It is probable they could have helped each other, and would. Burns could have helped Wordsworth to keep his early simplicity, and Wordsworth could have pointed out Burns's occasional lapses into poetic diction. Instead, Wordsworth wrote an essay on the subject after Burns was dead. It is not usual in Scotland to consider the implications of Burns's influence on Wordsworth. We try to think of a Scottish tradition, yet the evidence suggests that things worked out altogether differently. Fourteenth century Chaucer in England inspired the fifteenth century poets of Scotland. Robert Burns in eighteenth century Scotland repaid the debt by helping to inspire the first great English poet of the nineteenth century.

Remembering Robert Burns guessing about the future and fearing it, and John Keats who died fearing that his name was writ in water, we remember also that neither of them had any real cause to fear the future. The future has taken care of them. Keats wrote two sonnets on Robert Burns, but summed him up in a line he wrote in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn,"

when he was not thinking of Robert Burns,
'wor ever wilt thou love and she be fair:'

It applies equally well to the poet we are honouring here to—night. Shakespeare, too, feared the future, knowing that time is the great enemy. But he had one hope that in his case, as in the case of Robert Burns, was justified. He has expressed so well why we hold his name in immortal memory, that I would like to make his words speak for Burns too:—

"Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold' a plea
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?"
Against the wretched siege of battering days,
'When rocks impregnable are not so stout
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditations where, slack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie lid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright."

In that last line, Shakespeare has expressed also the secret of Robert Burns's immortality, an undying thing preserved in the memory of every Scotsman, and in the memory of many

who are not Scotsmen. 'every one honours that mystery aki_ to the creation of the universe, the power of a great poet to create something whose beauty, in Shakespeare's words, is no stronger than a flower, and yet has an immortality denied to things made of brass, or stone, or steel.
I give you "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns."