

## Mr T S McCrorie IMMORTAL MEMORY (1955)

T Mr. T. S. McCrorie, curator of Burns House, Dumfries, proposed the principal toast, at the annual dinner of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club, which was held in the Globe Inn, Dumfries, on Tuesday evening. Mr. McCrorie, who is a past president and honorary member of the Howff Club, gave what was afterwards described as one of the most interesting talks on Robert Burns ever heard in the Globe. Taking as his theme "Burns and the Bible," he spoke of Burns as a man of religion, and of the influence the Bible had on his works.

Proposing "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns," Mr McCrorie said that, born of humble, God-fearing parents in the Auld Clay Biggin at Alloway, Burns's entry upon life, like his whole life itself, was a stormy one. His life from his infancy was a hard struggle against poverty. The conditions under which the rural population of Scotland lived at that time were deplorable, and the standard of living was very low; yet, despite the handicaps of poverty, he was able by his genius to raise himself to a position in the hearts of his countrymen that had never been reached before nor since by any mortal. The story of his early life was easily told, for it was spent in drudgery and toil and poverty. Robert Burns described his life then as "the cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley slave." It was in that atmosphere that he developed his character, and it might well be that only in adversity could really great character be formed, and it might be that humanity owed to that environment the development of the poet's genius.

Robert Burns's father was a remarkable man, and in many respects as remarkable as his son. Robert owed much to his father, who was of the very finest type of Scottish peasant, and who was distinguished by an unusual degree of uprightness and intelligence. Robert said of his father:—"My father picked up a pretty large quantity of wisdom and experience to which I am indebted for most of my pretensions and wisdom." Although Robert Burns went to school in Alloway, the main part of his education came from his father, from his home life, and from the books belonging to his father which he read over and over again in the long winter evenings. There was no great choice of books — some plays of Shakespeare, Allan Ramsay's works, Pope's works, Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations," Locke's "Essays on the Human Understanding," and the Holy Bible — the sort of books one could expect to find in the home of a man like William Burns.

In a letter to John Murdoch — his old school teacher in Alloway — in 1733, Burns said: "My favourite authors are of the sentimental kind, such as Shentonel particularly his elegies, and Thomson's "Man of Feeling," a book I prize next to the Holy Bible." There was little doubt that Burns's study of the Holy Bible had a great influence on his life and works. Writing to his father from Irvine in 1781, where Robert had been very ill, he said: "I am quite transported that ere long, perhaps very soon, I shall bid an eternal adieu to all the pains and uneasiness and disquietudes of this weary life, and it is for this reason that I am more pleased with the 15th, 16th and 17th verses of the seventh chapter of Revelations than with any ten times as many verses in

the whole Bible." In a letter to Robert Aiken, a lawyer in Ayr, who was a great friend of Robert Burns wrote in 1736:—"You may perhaps think it is an extravagant fancy, but is a sentiment which strikes home to my very soul, though sceptical on some points of our current beliefs, yet I think I have every evidence for a life beyond the stunted bourne of our present existence. 'O Thou great unknown power, Thou Almighty God who has

lighted up reason in my breast and blessed me with immortality. I have frequently wandered from that order and regularity necessary for the perfection of Thy works, yet Thou hast never left me nor forsaken me." There were over 700 letters of Robert Burns

known to be in existence and it was a remarkable fact that that one, written ten years before his death, should state his belief that he would be immortal. In February, 1794, from his home in the Hill Vermeil Robert Burns wrote to Mr. Alexander Cunningham in Edinburgh :— "I do not remember that you and I talked ever on the subject of religion at all. I know some who laugh at it, as the trick of the crafty few, to lead the undiscerning many, or at most, as an uncertain obscurity which man can never know anything of, and with which they are fools if they give themselves much to do. Nor would I quarrel with a man for his irreligion any more than I would for the want of a musical ear. I would regret that he was shut out from what to me and to others were such superlative sources of enjoyment. It is from this point of view and for this reason that I will imbue the mind

of every child of mine with religion." Writing to James Clark, a schoolmaster in Forfar, in June, 1796, from his home, Burns said:— "Were you to see the emaciated figure who now holds the pen to you, you would not know your old friend; whether I shall ever get about again is only known to Him, the Great Unknown, Whose creature I am. Alas, I begin to fear the worst, as to my individual self, I am tranquil, but Burns's poor widow and a half dozen of his dear little ones, there I am as weak as a woman's tear." Those extracts

from his letters ranged from 1781, when he was 22, until June, 1796, twenty—five days before his death, and all showed how he was influenced by the Bible.

After comparing some of Burns's poems with passages of scripture from the Bible, Mr. McCrorie went on to say that much had, been written and said about Robert Burns's quarrel with the kirk, but his quarrel was not against religion, but against the doctrines of Calvinism and predestination that had engendered a paralysing influence on progressive thought in the kirk. The kirk session, composed exclusively of laymen, with a clergyman presiding, had become an intolerable social tyranny, arrogating to itself all the functions of local government, and interfering with personal liberty. Burns saw the principle at stake, and with all the power of his pen he covered them with ridicule.

When he was at Ellisland he attended church at Dunscore, and to Mrs. Dunlop he gave an account of the sermon, saying:— "From such ideas of my Creator, good Lord deliver me". Writing very shortly to Mrs. Dunlop, he said:— "Whatever mitigates the woes or increase the happiness of others, this is my criterion of goodness, and whatever injures society at large or any individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity.

What think you of my creed?" Pretence or hypocrisy in church, state or family life Burns could not endure and when, in defence of his friend Gavin Hamilton, he took up his pen and wrote "Holy Willie's Prayer," never in all probability had so tremendous an invective been made against hypocrisy. He turned the attention of the Kirk Session on himself, and after holding three meetings to consider the matter, they turned their whole artillery on Burns. That quarrel with the Kirk it-s a bitter one and when Burns let himself go his satire was terrible and overwhelming. There was, however, ample evidence to prove that the exposure by means of that terrific satire and the caricature of the excesses of the so—called Holy Fair did much to cleanse and purify religion in Scotland. Robert Burns was no hypocrite. He knew he was born with furious passions and in several of his poems he mentioned that fact. Robert Burns's veneration and belief in the All Highest were beyond question. His excesses were exaggerated by

local gossip, and in all his follies he never lost his reverence for his earthly nor his Heavenly Father.

In "The Cotter's Saturday Night" he gave a picture of family life in his father's home which had thrown a halo of poetry round the lives of the Scottish peasantry by a son whose failings and faults never quenched the holy fire lit at that household altar:—  
Then kneeling down to Heaven's eternal King,  
The Saint, the Father, and the Husband prays;  
Hope "springs exulting on triumphant wing,"  
That thus they all shall meet in future days.

Again the poet said:—

From scenes like these, old Scotia's grandeur springs,  
That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad:  
Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,  
An honest man's the noblest work of God.

Through the instrumentality of Robert Burns, the vernacular poetry of Scotland ceased to be the poetry of a remote nation and was elevated to the level of the great poetry of the world, and for the spirit of song Burns had no equal, not in Scottish literature alone, but in the literature of the world. He gave to Scotland some of the most tender and beautiful songs in any language.

Mr. McCrorie went on to say that whatever influences might have developed the poetic genius of Robert Burns, they must never forget that he was born to be a poet, that he was a poet by nature, that the gift that was born in him was not the gift of art, but a gift of nature, as much as the song of the lark or the song of the linnet. He poured forth the rich melodies of his genius over Scotland simply because, like the lark or the linnet, he could not help but sing. His poetry was born in love and awakened in him beautiful emotions and noble thoughts. There was scarcely an emotion adapted for expression in lyrical poetry that was not represented somewhere or other among the songs of Burns.

Speaking of the independence of Burns, Mr. McCrorie said that when he was in Edinburgh, Burns received a letter from Mrs. Dunlop advising him that he should omit a poem from the Edinburgh edition of his works which had been included in the Kilmarnock edition. Mrs. Dunlop felt that it would injure his prospects. In his reply Burns wrote:—"Poets much my superior have so flattered those who possessed the adventitious qualities of wealth and power that I am determined to flatter no created being either in prose or verse.

I set as little by princes, lords, clergy, critics, as all these gentry do by my hardship. I know what I may expect from the world by and by, illiberal abuse and perhaps contemptuous neglect.

Burns scorned servility and tyranny. He saw in the soul of man, in his aspirations and independence of mind, something that came to that man direct from his Maker. He taught with a fervour and insistence scarcely equalled since, the supreme revelation of the worth of a man's soul that "a man's a man for a' that." sought for a fair chance for

every man, an open road to success and happiness for every man, irrespective of station of life. He realised that every man of whatever race or clime had those inherent rights and privileges. He realised the great message that his Divine Master had

brought to this earth nearly 1800 years before his time: "That man to man the world  
o'er shall brothers be for a' that."

In conclusion, Mr McCrorie said that Hobert Burns's genius was ex-tinguished in  
tragedy and poverty. He was born and he died in poverty, but he left the world  
a rich legacy. His idea of wealth was wealth of friends, his idea of poverty, never to  
have made another happy. His life needed no defence. He was a great poet and a  
great big—hearted human man, who stood for love and true fellowship and sympathy  
for and kindness to his brother man :-

"Then gently scan your brother Man

Still gentler sister Woman;

Tho' they may gang a kennin wrang, To step aside is human.

Tho 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 each be mute, We never can adjust it;

What's done we partly may compute,

But know not what's resisted."

Piper Maxwell played a lament as the toast was pledged.