

Mr JAMES VEITCH, IMMORTAL MEMORY 1957

At the 69th annual dinner of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club, held in the Globe Inn on Friday evening, 25th January, 1957, "The Immortal Memory" was proposed by Mr. James Veitch, Peebles, the editor of the "Robert Burns Chronicle." In the course of his interesting and thoughtful address, Mr. Veitch spoke of Burns as an observer rather than a thinker, and went on to say that in his work there was a superb sense of craftsmanship. Behind Burns' skill and poetic power, he added, was that simplicity which was the gift of all great writers, and of all great men. Introducing Mr. Veitch, Provost G. J. MoDowall said that, in addition to editing the "Robert Burns Chronicle," Mr. Veitch was the distinguished author of a number of books, and they were honoured to have him as their principal guest.

Mr. Veitch began by saying that there was a disadvantage in coming to Dumfries to propose "The Immortal Memory," because in Dumfries they had a deeper sense of association and intimacy with Burns than most other people. In Dumfries they might well feel that his ghost still frequented the old streets and vennels, and in Dumfries certainly the last terrible chapter of his life was enacted. Yet to understand Burns they had to picture his living in the Scotland of his day — not necessarily in Dumfries, but in any part of the Scottish countryside. We are told that Burns was the personification of the common man, but surely he was an uncommon man. The late Catherine Carswell pointed out that a man of genius is like everybody else, but nobody else is like him. This definition suits Burns to perfection. My own opinion has always been that Burns was not a farmer who happened to write poetry; he was a poet who happened to be a farmer. How could the wife of William Burns know that the black-haired baby at her breast was to be nourished at the nipples of a strange, imperishable destiny? Yet it is well to remember the illiterate brown-eyed woman who gave him life; for she, by doing so, gave him to the world. So, then, what was it like for Burns in the Scotland of his day? Picture the end of a day's darg in the fields. On the road home in the gloaming, some haflin must have turned to his father with the remark, "What d'ye make o' Burns? Fashin' himsel' about a moose o' a' things." And his father would no doubt reply, "Burns? Auch he's half daft." That is always how you sum up a man in Scotland when you don't understand him.

The real Burns walked alone — and he knew he walked alone, — with a terrible responsibility of greatness upon him. You may remind me that he founded the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, that he mixed with and studied the beggarly company in Poesie Nancie's, and was sometimes entertained by the titled people who patronised him. And you may also remind me of Clarinda, Maria Riddel and the rest. I still believe that, behind it all, Burns was a solitary, lonely man. He induced friends and cronies to think of him as one of themselves. That was, in a sense, a measure of his greatness. But he was, nevertheless: the odd man out, a chiel among them takin' notes, as he described Captain Grose. We see him as an observer rather than a thinker. After all, Burns himself has said as much. To John Murdoch, he wrote: "I seem to be one sent into the world to see and observe." A first-class observer is, however, infinitely superior to a second-class thinker, and Burns never over looked a single detail. In winter, he saw where "the birds sit chittering in the thorn," and, in spring, the rosebud by his early walk. In all probability, Burns was too sensitive for his contemporaries, but to be fair, how could anyone have understood Burns? At eighteen, he still seemed to be a raw, rather awkward rustic; nine years later, the Kilmarnock edition was given to the world. He was, in his circumstances, well read, and, when he discovered Fergusson, he saw how to use his mother tongue with striking, and often shattering effect. Under Fergusson's influence, he wrote "The Twa

Herds," "The Holy Fair," "The Ordination," "Holy Willie's Prayer," and others you remember this description of Hell in "The Holy Fair" ?

A vast, unbottom'd, boundless pit,  
Filled fou o' lowin' brimstane,  
Whase ragin, flame an, scorching heat  
Wad melt the hardest whun—stane:  
The half—asleep start up wi' fear,  
An' think they hear it roarin',  
When presently it does appear,  
'Twas but some neighbour snorin'

Asleep that day.

In such poetry, of course, it was not religion that Burns lashed with satire; it was intolerance and hypocrisy. Anyhow, Fergusson's influence was a phase which ended with "To a Haggis."

Afterwards, Burns went on, with — as his best — his own sure and certain instinct to guide him. Behind his work there was a superb sense of craft—smanship. He cared tremendously for words, and he took enormous pains. The customary belief is to think of Burns pouring out a love song as soon as he had taken a comely lassie in his arms. Don't you believe it. Passion might cause him to love a girl; the same emotion might crystallise the experience in poetry; but it was ice—cold reason and craftsmanship that gave us the polished song. Burns himself declared "All my poetry is the effect of easy composition but of laborious correction." He also revealed that, "Though the rough material of fine writing is undoubtedly the gift of genius, the workmanship is as certainly the united efforts of labour, attention and pains." Think of him, then, alone in his study — committing his effusions to paper and "swinging at intervals," as he says, "on the hind—legs of my elbow—chair, by way of calling forth my own critical strictures" — and you see how clearly he worked. He never wrote the words of a song and hoped that, by a stroke of luck, they would be set to appropriate music. The tune had to be there — always, always the tune first of all — and with music dirlin' in his brain, he could trust himself to find the words to fit it. A few weeks before his death, he asked Jessie Lewars to play her favourite tune, and she responded with a perky little air: "The robin came to the wren's nest, and keekit in, and keekit in." And by altering the tempo of this

tune, Burns gave us:

Oh wert thou in the cauld blast,  
On yonder lea, on yonder lea,  
My plaidie to the angry airt,  
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee.

"Quite often, too, he used Scots and English in deliberate and happy union :-

"Ae fond kiss, and then we sever,  
Ae fareweel, and then for ever

The use of "ae" and "sae" is important; for if he had written "One fond kiss?" and "One farewell""so kindly" and "so blindly" Burns would never have captured the true pathos. The same is true — in a sense — of "Tam o' Shanter." One particular passage in English is to my mind, introduced intentionally. It is to give you pause before the dramatic resumption of Tam's adventure

"where ghaists-and houlets nightly cry "  
"But pleasures are like poppies spread,

You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;  
Or like the snow falls in the river,  
    A moment white — then melts for ever;  
Or like the borealis race  
    That flit ere you can point their place;  
    Or like the rainbow's lovely form  
    Evanishing amid the storm.  
    Nae man can tether time or tide,  
    The hour approaches Tam maun ride."

You see the sudden, rousing change the complete craftsman, as ever, is at Burns' shoulder. Which also goes to prove that he never — on this earth — wrote "Tam o' Shanter" in a day, as is popularly believed. You will find, too, if you have not already done so, that the right word is always in the right place. It is the secret of his extraordinary vividness, Take the picture of Luath in "The Twa Dogs."

    "He was a gash and faithfu' tyke,  
As ever lap a sheugh or dyke.  
His honest, sonsie, baws'nt face  
Ay gat him friends in ilka place;  
His breast was white, tis tousie back  
Weel clad wi' coat o' glossy black;  
His gawsie tail, wi' upward curl,  
Hung owre his hurdies wi' a swirl."

There, before your eyes, is the herd's collie — correct in every detail even to this day of tractors and farmers' brow cars. But behind Burns' skill and poetic power is that simplicity which is the gift of all great writers, and, for that matter, all great men. The Bible, as literature, is crammed full of this simplicity; you don't need a dictionary to understand great art. And that, I think, is why Burns is so beloved, why men and women in many parts of the world salute his memory each year. They find in Burns the expression of those emotions that they have all experienced at one time or another. From the days of Auld Lang Syne when they "paidl'd in the burn frae morning sun till dine," through all the loves and quarrels and laughter and tears that make up the human comedy. Here, again, is an explanation of Burns' universal appeal. He wrote about human nature from the inside, and human nature knows no frontiers. Being wise after the event, we know, too, that he arrived — the right man at the right time — when Scotland was in danger of losing her individuality of expression. Without him, we might have lost our proud traditions, and Professor Blackie was not far wrong when he said that, when Scotland forgets Burns, then history will forget Scotland. Over the years, of course, Burns has been turned inside out. His worshippers and the mud—slingers have all had their say and, quite possibly, their day. The politicians have flocked round, each trying in turn to claim Burns as a kind of symbol for their own particular party. Yet Burns himself, throughout his own particular hell on earth, remained faithful to his calling and to himself. Surely it is for us to the man for what he was, heart and soul, a poet and the author of some of the world's greatest love songs. In the end, that is all that matters. With that in mind — and before we drink the time—honoured toast — we might recall the tribute that a French—man paid to Turgenieff, the Russian writer; for it might well be said of Burns. "His conscience was not that of an individual to whom nature had been more or less generous: it was in some sort the conscience of a people. Before he was born he had lived for thousands of years; infinite successions of reveries had amassed themselves in the depth of his heart. No man has been as much

as he the incarnation of a whole race; generations of ancestors, lost in the sleep of centuries, speechless, came through him to life and utterance.