

BAILLIE ERNEST ROBERTSON — IMMORTAL MEMORY. 1959

At the seventy—first annual dinner of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club, held in the Globe Inn on Friday evening, 23rd January, 1959 "The Immortal Memory" was proposed by Bailie Ernest Robertson, Dumfries. In the course of his interesting address, Bailie Robertson told his listeners that Burns was not, like most other great poets, a cold abstraction in whose personal history we could not feel more than a limited interest. The brief, tragic story of the Scottish Bard, he said, went direct to our hearts. We had in Burns one of the world's real heroes, as Carlyle called him. We ought to bury a man's vices with him, and let his virtues alone live after him. We ought to receive with thankfulness the good which he left behind him, and throw the idle mantle of charity over his faults and failings. The Poet himself had said:— "God knows that I am no saint. I have a whole host of sins and follies to answer for, but if I could, and I believe I do it as far as I can, I would wipe away all tears from all eyes." Bailie Robertson, in submitting the toast of the "Immortal Memory," said:— "I thank you for the great honour you have done me by inviting me to Propose the toast of "The Immortal Memory" in this historic Howff, but you have also laid on me a great burden, that of attempting to do justice, in any shape or fashion, to the memory of Robert Burns.

The 25th January, 1959, will be a red letter day.

On that day we celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of our National Poet, and our hearts are filled with great joy. We meet tonight in a spirit of gratitude, and give thanks that Burns lived. If we live in the hearts of those we have loved, it is not to die, and we know that the name and fame of Burns will live for ever.

Perhaps I should say here I do not intend this evening to take you on a journey through Burns' life and work — to an audience such as this, I feel it is not necessary. I am going to pay my own tribute to a man who has done so much for Scotland, a man who was undoubtedly "The Voice of Scotland."

Robert Burns was the most tensely living man this country produced. He had a perpetually live and seething brain, a heart beating in big and audible throbs, with the most eloquent lips that ever spoke in Scotland. But, in another sense, his life was so short, so fragmentary, and so contradictory in itself, that to speak of the life of Burns sounds like cruel irony — sad, shadowed and incoherent as it was — and the feeling is not lessened, but increased, and the disturbance of the whole rendered more painful and mysterious by the wild happiness and the inspiration by which it was surrounded. Besides the difficulties connected with such a strange and exceptional existence as was his, there also arise the fact that the tale of his life, with the union or disunion of elements, has been so often told that it seems hopeless to seek to give it any new interest, or to draw from it any stronger moral than has been drawn.

He was born two hundred year ago, on the 25th of January, 1759, in a humble cottage about two miles south of Ayr, not far from Alloway Kirk and the banks of the Doon, now rendered immortal by his verses. He was born the year before the death of King George 11., and the date of his birth he quaintly recorded thus:—

"Our monarch's hindmost year but ane
Was five—and—twenty days begun,
Twas then a blast o' Janwar 'win'
Blew hanel in on Robin."

The Janwar' win' never ceased long at a time to blow on him, and though he manfully tried:—

"To snap his fingers pair and hearty
Before its face?"

it was in the long run too "chill" for him, and he succumbed under it on July 21st, 1796, in his thirty—eighth year.

When Burns was born, Scotland, although she had been united — with England for half a century, was as much a separate nation — with a distinct language, different laws, and peculiar customs — as if the Articles of Union had never been penned.

The Scottish language was universally spoken in the halls of the noble, from the pulpit, and from the bench, as well as in the cottage. But by the time Burns arrived at manhood, the influence of England had already wrought great changes and everyone felt it was destined to effect more. The peasantry were still intensely Scottish, and it was thus that Burns' poems and songs were received by them with so much enthusiasm. They expressed the feelings of the nation in the common language. Scotland needed a poet to embody in song the life of the country before a foreign element had weakened and changed its conditions. And, obedient to the great law, when the time was ripe for the man, the man appeared — ripe, ready and specially gifted for the task.

He sprang from that class of the People which suited his mission — a class which has given Scotland some of her greatest ornaments. While from association and sympathy he was a peasant, he had received the education of a farmer's son. The one fitted him to be a poet of the people, the other to wed their aspirations and emotions to immortal verse.

In his early youth he cherished the idea which he was fated to work out:—

"E'en then a wish (I mind its power)—

A wish that to my latest hour

Shall strongly heave my breast:

That I for poor auld Scotland's sake

Some useful plan or beuk could make,

Or sing a sang at least."

Without Burns we would not have had so much manly independence among all classes in Scotland. Moralists might write essays innumerable, but they would struggle in vain to teach by any dissertations, however eloquent, what Burns gives in a couple of lines, with a power which brands the sentiment upon the brain forever.

He strove to "preserve the dignity of man with soul erect."

He was not capable of understanding that spirit of humility which rejoices in cringing to some fellow mortal, merely because he is rich? and who probably has little claim to respect. To those in high station who were worthy of his regards, he paid them with a poet's heartiness, but he had no respect for mere rank and mere station when dissevered from worth.

A prince can mak' a belted knight,

A marquis, duke and a' that;

But an honest man's aboon his might

Gude faith, he mauna fa' that !

Burns is not, like most other great poets, a cold abstraction, in whose personal history we cannot feel more than a limited interest.

The brief, tragic story of the Scottish Bard goes direct to our hearts. Contrary to some beliefs, he was not neglected during his lifetime, but he never got much beyond "the auld clay biggin" in which he was born. He had but little reason to thank the rich or the great for any encouragement he received at their hands, and at length, after that stern life—battle of his, he sank into what people even to—day call a dishonoured grave.

But truth can never die. The gold is sure to be discovered at sometime or other.

Scotland has at length arisen to do justice to her poet, and to tell the world of her

gratitude for the minstrel who came to sing her the sweetest songs to which she had ever listened.

The ploughman, around whom the muse cast the mantle of poesy, is acknowledged as the greatest of "Auld Scotia's Sons." There are some people, however, who look with no friendly eye on the poet. In spite of this he has well earned for himself a lofty niche in the temple of fame.

We have nothing to do with Burns' sins. For these he has had to give an account to a higher tribunal than that of public opinion. We have to judge for ourselves, and have no need to be deterred by bigotry, or by the malice of others.

We have in him one of the world's real heroes, as Carlyle calls him, and let us give to him the tribute which is his due. We ought to bury a man's vices with him, and let his virtues alone live after him. We ought to receive with thankfulness the good which he leaves behind him, and throw the wide mantle of charity over his faults and failings.

He himself says:— "God knows I am no saint. I have a whole host of sins and follies to answer for, but if I could, and I believe I do it as far as I can, I would wipe away all tears from all eyes."

During his visit to Edinburgh, Burns saw that much of the homage paid to him was but fashion without substantial reality. He remarked in a letter to Dr Currie:— "I have formed many intimacies and friendships here, but I am afraid they are all of too tender a construction to bear carriage a hundred and fifty miles."

The neglected grave of Fergusson had been a grand lesson to him in this respect. The verses he wrote under Fergusson's portrait indicate how deeply the fact of the world's ungrateful neglect had engraved itself upon his mind:—

"Curse on ungrateful man, that can be pleased
And yet can starve the author of the pleasure.

Ah thou, my elder brother in misfortune,

By far my elder brother in the muse,

With tears I pity thy unhappy fate:

Why is the bard unfitted for the world,

Yet has so keen a relish of its pleasures."

How gloriously the genius of Burns shines when he uses

it to conserve the neglected genius of his brother bard. He says:— "This burial place is to remain forever sacred to the memory of Robert Fergusson." — forever assuredly, as Burns' genius exists for all time.

One of our greatest delights in connection with literary genius is in thinking of Burns, realising him as a positive personal identity, the man with brawny shoulders, slightly bent, through ceaseless and excessive toil. He seems at first a man in no way noteworthy beside his fellow.

But look again, and is there not a something in that large, dark, keen, and fascinating eye which even the cynic would note, and feel moving him to respect, reverence or fear? Yes, that eye, filled with a rare light and beaming with inspiration, sheds lustre, or grace, or terror on all who come within its range.

It proclaims him, to all who can read him aright, the bearer of a divine gift, the elected for some high mission in the realms of thought,

a royal mission from the great court of Nature, where merit alone receives distinction.

For that man now — the then misjudged and often misunderstood:—

Fame holds her golden clarion to her lips

And sounds his praises over all the world.

Think of him on that wild and lonely moor, with storm

and thunder about him, towering in his great mood. By some inscrutable association, the tide of historic memories sweeps across his brain. Bannockburn arrests his imagination, his soul at a thought cancels centuries of time, Bruce and the field of Bannockburn are before his mind's eye, and that great Scottish anthem is born:—

"Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victory

Now's the day, and now's the hour; See the front of battle lour;
See approach proud Edward's power —

Chains and slaverie:

By oppression's woes and pains:
drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free:

By your sons in servile chains: We will

Lay the proud usurper low:

Tyrants fall in ev'ry foe:

Liberty's in ev'ry blow:

Let us do or die:

There is no bitterness or malice in Burns' thoughts when he wrote that it was beyond one's power to keep at times from being sour, when he saw how the good things of this life were divided out.

He would not stoop to humour, or work to selfish worldly ends, natures to which his own felt so repugnant. This species of tactics, which so many consider the highest wisdom, his manly independent mind revolted from.

Because of this, Burns and his fortunes were never taken very earnestly in hand by any one of his wealthy, or learned, or illustrious patrons and admirers. Could he have mounted a little of the furnishings of the art-ful hypocrite, or the pliant sycophant, he might have slipped into the robes and dignity of some lucrative office.

But no, he was content to remain poor and laborious rather than accept of riches and ease on such humiliating conditions. Who would have wished it to be otherwise? Burns lacked the dexterous management of his great parts to slip into the robes of great titles. His gifts were too glorious to be hidden even under a bushel.

He had a higher and holier mission to fulfil. He knew it, and felt it with the fervour of a revealed truth. Hear him speak for himself in such a strain of noble consciousness as a truly great soul alone dared utter:—

"The Poetic Genius of my country found me, as the prophetic bard Elijah or Elisha — at the Plough, and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scene, and rural pleasures of my native soil, in my native tongue. I tuned my wild artless notes as She inspired."

Was this not a glorious destiny — a pre-eminence more to

be coveted than the highest dignities of the realm — to soar forth in the plentitude of his soul's great powers, 'clad in his singing robes,' and become the:—

"High Priest of Scottih song

That could alternately impart

Delights and rapture to his page,

Or brand each vice with ;,.:atire strong.

His trutlis electrify the sage,

His lines are mottoes of the heart."

We follow the poet from his lowly birth in the humble cottage by the roadside, not far from Ayr, through the loves and disappointments, the joys and sorrows, and the

struggle of his youth, till that dark hour when, in the bitter gloom of his misfortunes, he had resolved to seek in a distant land those means of subsistence which seemed to be denied him at home. In the dismal struggle that ensued our hearts overflow with sympathy for the sufferer sinking under accumulated disappointments.

Great men are often unknown in life — they have to bear the frowns of an adverse fortune — they have to mingle with the masses as they pass onwards to the unseen, and perhaps it is well it is so, for we are thus taught that true genius depends, not upon human aid, but on the inborn gift of heaven.

He says to us:- "These poems I have written for you," and we receive them, for we find they are in accordance with our own natures. Who is there who does not feel his soul stirred to its very depth by the mention of "Auld Lang Syne?" It seems to gather the light of other days around us. It carries us back to a time when under the old roof we knelt to receive a parent's blessing, and went hand in hand with a brother through youth's opening morn.

Who is there who does not enjoy the domestic scene in "The Cottar's Saturday Night" and feel once more as if he were in the midst of that little circle around his father's hearth, when the hoary sire took down "the big ha' Bible" and said "let us worship God"? Who is there who does not mourn with the poet by the grave of his dear departed Mary? And who does not laugh with him amid the boisterous glee of his own "Hallowe'en."

It is to us he speaks, the descendants of those who bled with Wallace and whom Bruce often led to victory. Let but one of those lays be sung in the ears of the Scottish exile, far from home and Motherland, and immediately the big tear begins to trickle down his cheek. Visions of other days arise before him, and he thanks God that he belongs to the land of Burns.

Burns is a poet true to nature. He is the expounder of the holiest and best affections of the country—men, and thus his name will never be forgotten so long as Scotland possesses the same warm, unsullied heart as at present.

We can boast of other poets who perhaps, take a greater possession of the emotions, but none who commands so wide and varied a range of sympathies; none who has given to us so many and such profound touches of our common nature, any one of which "makes the whole world kin" Manners and customs may change, modes of thinking may chance, but these touches - these bursts of feeling and emotion (Cont.)