

EDWARD ARMSTRONG IMMORTAL MEMORY. (1971).

It was rather unfortunate that the universally accepted greatness of Burns had given rise in some circles to a belief that everything he wrote had value.

This was said by Mr. Edward Armstrong, town clerk of Langholm, when he proposed "The Immortal Memory" at Dumfries Burns Howff Club dinner in the Globe inn on Monday.

Mr. Armstrong added that, ignorant or forgetful of the poet's oft-declared contempt for mere position, and his unshakeable faith in the dignity of man, some mis-guided souls tried to persuade us that he "must be blindly worshipped as an idol on the pedestal of Scotland." This was arrant nonsense.

Is it right that so rare a genius, so magnetic a personality, so great a humanitarian as Robert Burns should be condemned to a lofty, lonely perch, high above the people he knew and loved (his people), a man apart, remote from reality?

I say no:

If there ever was a man of the people, that man was Robert Burns. And let me emphasise 'man', let me underline it.

Burns was no inanimate piece of marble - he was flesh and blood, vital and alive, one of the most compassionate of men, sincere and honest and noble, a man with room in his heart for even Satan himself, "Auld Nickie-Ben."

Earlier, Mr. Armstrong said it seemed incredible that anyone of humble origin, let alone a poor ploughboy with despair and destitution his only neighbours, could have soared to the heights of fame, if not fortune, known to Burns.

But as Thomas Carlyle rightly pointed out, "the boy was fortunate in his father - a man of thoughtful, intense character, valuing knowledge, possessing some and open-minded for more."

Indeed, as they all knew, Burns owed his education to his in-tellectual rather than practical father - that essential education which kindled the dormant flame of genius, And, after he was taught to read, he was to be found, even at meal times, with a spoon in one hand and a book in the other - that book going with him into the field and to a plough.

Despite the obvious, there were still some who would have us believe that it was the ghostly goddess of poetry, not knowledge, who guided the hand of the Bard as he wrote. This was arrant nonsense.

He venture to suggest that the genius of poetry was but a visitor paying homage to her master.

Mr. Armstrong went on to say that, because Burns dared to ridicule the Unco Guid, and expose the Holy Willies of his day; because he remorselessly scourged the 18th century Pharisees masquerading as saints, he had been accused, and through all his trials and tribulations, he constantly responded to the cottar's summons, "Let us worship God."

"An atheist's laugh's a poor exchange for a Deity offended" was the moral of all the poet's verses dealing seriously with religious matters, and there was no doubt that he was a great — albeit rough — moralist.

His prayers in rhyme placed him high among the secular psalmists.

I think you will find that Burns, despite, or maybe because of, his freely acknowledged shortcomings, his follies, his failures, despite his scathing satires, was as devout as his accusers.