MR.G .W. SHDLEY — (1921 ) .

Mr. G. W. Shirley, in proposing "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns," said:— We all know that it was in 1759 that 'a blast o' Janwar win' blew hansel in an Robin,' and I wish you to note the significance of the date. It was in fact, virtually the last decade in which Nature, were she a conscious being, could have produced from the peasantry of Scotland a typical peasant poet. It was in that decade that a process, begun a couple of centuries before and slowly cumulating, reached full vigour, and which during the succeeding fifty years swept on until the peasantry of Britain, its ancient pride, the bowmen, halberdiers, and men—at—arms in all its wars, the patient tillers of its soil, the stock from which was drawn its sailors to be found on all the seven seas, were displaced from the land, scattered to its colonies and to the newly arisen factories, or thrown into the ranks of the day—labourers or to the untender officers of the poor law. I cannot deal here with the great displacement which culminated in the Enclosure Acts, but its effect may be summed up by saying that in the old village it is doubtful if there could be found a single cottar or small farmer who had not common land to cultivate or was not possessed of those rights of common which gave Him the fuel he picked up in the woods and turf and peat from the common muir, the cow which he kept on the village pasture, the strip of land on which he grew some bushels of wheat, beans for his pig, goose, or poultry; ("you ask what I have lost by it," said our cottar, "Before the parish was enclosed I kept four cows, and now I don't keep so much as a goose. It is worse than ten wars.") And that after the passing of these Acts it was difficult to find the small farmer at all, and if one did do so he was found more or less involved in difficulties — struggling against adversities — as William Burness was at Mount Oliphant and Lochlea, and Burns himself was at Mossgiel and Ellisland, and as for the cottar, he had become a totally landless man. The Enclosure Acts, in fact, completed the degradation and ruin of the agricultural poor. Wealth accumulated and men decayed. During the term of Burns' life, this process went on until the peasantry, erstwhile based stoutly upon common rights, and, though often desparately poor and independent because of these resources, was disinherited and forced "to beg a brother of the earth to give him leave to toil." Though a "village Hampden with dauntless breast" he might be, the peasant could not withstand "the little tyrant of his fields."

Does it not seem then, as if the Guardian Spirit of Scotland, foreseeing this passing of a fine races foreseeing that its life and characteristics, its ideals and independence, its humours, loves, and struggles, might pass away with but a fragmentary record from the earth, raised up to it for all time, so that it might never be forgotten, this man Robert Burns, an immortal poet, an arch—typical once its monument and its glory?

It would appear, too, that Burns himself had some gleam of of this. We do not need to pass beyond the prefaces to his Kilmarnock and Edinburgh the genesis of the idea. In the Kilmarnock edition of 1786, he gave his reasons for writing verse. They are entirely personal: "To amuse himself," he wrote, "with the creations of his own fancy, amid the toil and fatigues of a laborious life,

to transcribe the various feelings, the loves, the griefs, the hopes and fears of his own breast, to find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of the world, always an alien scene, a task uncouth to the poetic mind, these were his motives for courting the muses, and in them he found poetry to be it's own reward." But a year later he assumes a nobler pose and steps boldly as the Peasant Poet. " The Poet Genius of my country", he wrote, bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my natal soil in my native tongue. I tuned my wild, artless notes as she

inspired." and can one doubt that he felt upon him a trust, a gift, a mission, when he so persistently refused to sell himself, thoug in dire distress,his genius for gold. Some have wondered that he should stoop to solicit loans when he might have sold, honouralY4:t they say, his literary output. Coarse must be the man who cannot understand the fineness of the spirit that refused the money changers admission to the Temple. Burns possessed that public spirit that will not condescend to barter its gifts in the market place.

How well he responded to his call. The variety of his work, the completeness of his presentation of the life of the people, is ever a source of delight and astonishment. From prayers to ribbald songs, from philosophising epistles to passionate love songs, from dramatic tales to the mordant humour, "Death and Dr Horn—brook?" from epigrammatic epitaphs to generously humourous character songs, from jovial drinking rounds to savage satire of the'unco guid,' there is hardly a feature of Scot¬tish life, hardly a phase of Scottish thought that he has not portrayed with a sure hand or illuminated in phrases of fire. Possessing no other material than that of the local poet? his genius bore him certain wing to the empyrean. No less than Euripides he was "the human

With his droppings of warm tears,
And his touches of things common,
Till they rose to touch the spheres."

There is one characteristic of the Scot which Burns, more than any man, has by his enunciation made known so that it has now become one of the dominant issues of life. "I was bred to the plough," he wrote, "and am independent?" and there is inherent in the Scottish stock this sturdy independence. An independence it is that never feared kings or principalities or powers, that rid itself of kings at need, never submitted to the dominance of a foreign Power, and put from itself all literature and art and grace of life for a century and a half rather than bow in a church other than its own; an independence this in both weft and woof of the race, and supremely resident and supremely expressed? as is meet? by Burns. We have modern synonyms for it, more popular than the old word, but democracy and self—determination are just applied expressions of the same spirit. It can be stated, without any exaggeration, that Burns is almost

the first and certainly is the greatest poet of modern democracy. Challenge comparison in Shelley, Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, Morris, Swinburne, Tennyson, and nowhere will you find so clear and concise, so embracing an enunciation of the brotherhood and the rights of man as in those phrases of Burns, which have become too familiar to require quotation. These others, too, were primarily literary men and wrote for a literary public. Burns is the plain man's poet, one to be understanded of the people. It would be difficult to estimate how deeply Burns has affected the modern world, even the League of Nations, by the simple strength of his "A man's a man for a' that," and "Man was made to Mourn."

Nor am I prepared to leave Burns' character out of this eulogy. No traducer of his, no critic has made me love the critic the better or Burns worse. The more clearly he has shown the weaknesses, the inconsistencies of Burns' character, the deeper he has pictured the depths to which Burns sank, the more clearly has he revealed his awn weaknesses, his own inconsistencies, the limitations of his own shallows. I beg you, gentlemen, to go rationally, if you go at all, into the question; to compare not our own dull selves with Burns, nor our successes with his failures, our rectitude with his irregularities, but like, if like in some measure can be found, with like. I suggest that if

Burns is compared with a man of temperament not wholly dissimilar, whose achievement in some ways resembles his, a man be it of like inflammable nature, whose songs, say, are the efforescence of his encounters with women and based on national product, such as Burns were — I suggest the greatest German poet, Goethe, as fulfilling some of these requirements — we shall not find Burns come off so badly in the judgement. With one class of people, however, there can be no comparison at all. It was impossible for Burns to be the dilettante spectator, he never "warmed both hands at the fire of life," but filled with eager passion for experience, possessed of quivering nerves responding to every scent and colour, taste and tune, of warm blood conscious of every hint and whisper and glance, he scorched himself so that it was all over in 37 years.

After all, each man will judge Burns according to the completeness or imperfection of his knowledge. "We know not what's resisted." To err is human,
to forgive, to blame, to lecture, to patronise is preposterous. Preposterous because — though it may be all unconscious — it means an assumption of superiority, which can only be effectively dealt with by a gust of ridiculing laughter. Surely by to—day we should have learned that there is a virtue in the lavish breaking of the box of precious ointment by a Mary that is not as much as sensed in housewifely philosophy of a Martha.

To my mind we would be much more effectively engaged in scanning, not Burns' conduct, but the shameful wastage of Burns' genius by the community. I do not suggest a cure nor pretend to possess one, yet I cannot but think it sad and shameful that before this splendidly gifted man could live and support his family, it was necessary that he should submit to the gruelling toil of a farm labourer — "the unceasing toil of a galley slave" he called it, and later should have to ride 200 miles a week/

"searching auld wives' barrels." What wastage: What criminal negligence: Think of the precious songs we might have had — the delight of other "Tam o' Shanters" other priceless lyrics like "Ae Fond Kiss" and. "Comin' thro' the Rye," other ballads like "Last May a Braw Wooer," more "Jolly Beggars;" all lost irretrievably because the only possible begetter and giver of these gifts was mucking fields or weary with long riding, or wasting time filling sheets of foolscap with paltry reports. Bitterest to me — bitter as a brew of gall and vinegar — is that incident where Burns, having written a frank verse in De Lohne's book "On .the British Constitution," which he had presented to the Dumfries Public Library, and become afraid of consequences, hastened the following day to paste up the page. To that state was Burns reduced by the petty officialdom of his day, and by fear "for his job." What this must have meant to he who had boasted of his independence and loved freedom like a bird, is hardly imaginable. "That clarty barn should stain his laurels" is not his shame, but his contemporaries', and as for us, have we arranged so that should another Burns appear among us, his treatment will be bettered: Until we have so arranged, we share the shame of this wastage of Burns with his contemporaries.

There, surely, is the heart of the whole tragedy. Make a law for
a wild brier, circumscribe the wild and free, cage the glorious blue bird, and what will happen? The brier will grow misshapen, the bird dash itself to pieces. And yet, with all the wrongs done his rare spirit, Burns still, even on his death—bed, gave to us all, immortal verse.

I bid you then, gentlemen, drink with all the honours the toast of Robert Burns, the last and greatest of the Scottish peasants, the first and greatest of the poets of democracy, the lover, the humanist the prince of good fellows, the chief glory of our Scottish literature and language. I bid you drink, with no reservation — Robert Burns.