

Dr GLOVER DUMFRIES IMMORTAL MEMORY (1923)

In the Globe Hotel, Dumfries, a place more reminiscent of Burns and his times than any other in the district, the Dumfries Burns Howff Club on Thursday night celebrated the birth of our National Poet. Mr. A. Shankland, president of the club, presided over a gathering numbering well on to 100, and the proceedings were of the usual full flavoured, hearty and wholesome kind that characterise the gatherings of this particular club. The Immortal Memory was proposed by Dr Glover, Dumfries, and for the toast the punch bowl and toddy ladle used by Burns when he frequented the Globe Hotel were brought in by the "Mother" of the club. Welcoming the guest of the evening — Dr Glover — the Chairman, who was seated in Burns' chair, referred to the setting in which the gathering was taking place, and the relics around them. Even the very windows were relics, on them Burns had tried his diamond, and in the room adjoining the kitchen were his table and his chair in the cosy nook where he sat with his cronies, pouring forth his love songs, his sweetest lays and his favourite pieces till far into midnight. They were not so particular about licences in these days. However the 'time came and they had to go and continuing, the Chairman picturesquely outlined the scene as it might have been. We were never done discussing Burns, he added, his fame grew with the years. That was why they were there, and throughout the world, wherever Scotsmen gathered, lovers of Burns were celebrating the anniversary that night. He said and he did so without hesitation, that they were honouring the greatest Scots-man who ever lived.

Dr Glover, in proposing "The Immortal Memory," spoke at the out-set on the complexity of Burns' character. Burns had to fraternize with all sorts and conditions of men, to know the human heart, the motives that actuate men. But he did not think Burns under any circumstances ever for one moment lost the personality of the great man. The splendid best that was in Burns was never far beneath the surface, because every now and then he rose above his waywardness, sang his deathless songs of love and liberty, breathed on the dying embers of our national life and raised fiercer fires of patriotism in a nation than ever burned before.

Continuing, Dr Glover said:— In whatever circumstance you find Burns, you feel that his finger is always on the pulse of life, that he understands man's joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, and that his sympathies-are always ready to overflow. He never passed by on the other side.

It was his tenderness that took him into the very heart of man and inspired the productions on which his world—wide fame rests — amongst all classes of people.

Also, I fear it often led him into trouble and misunderstanding of his purest motives. One has often seen or heard the statement that it was a pity Burns had formed this or that particular habit, which I regard as a most erroneous view. Could a genius like Burns confine himself to conventional grooves of life or conduct? I do not think so. Burns had an extraordinary, highly developed brain, and a warm-hearted, catholic sympathy, and it may be, probably is true, that his vagaries of conduct were a consequence of the fires of genius that burnt within him, the intense activity to which his brain was subject, more so at some times than others; so that he had the defects of

his qualities just as had many other great poets, such as Lord Byron, Shelley, Keats, Oliver Goldsmith, and even the gentle Wordsworth

When we read Burns works we perceive a lofty character which his human lapses do not suggest, and apparently not prejudicially affect; indeed, contrary to the usual rule, instead of lowering the character of Burns, his failings seem to have had a purifying, uplifting effect, to have acted as incitements to ever higher, ever nobler efforts. Why? Because Burns had an exquisite sense of beauty and excellence of character, and in his reflective hours was much more likely than other men to be deeply stirred and influenced by anything approaching ugliness in his own life, or in that of other people. You must concede to a particular genius like Burns' mental qualities that the rest of mankind do not possess - at least not in like degree. Genius, action and re-action. on his sensitive mind, of the varied incidents of his life, produced the man Burns and his works as we know them.

We must accept Burns as he was, the whole man, or else deplore that he ever existed, and who that has ever felt "a breath from the soul of Burns" can feel other than profoundly thankful for such a rare gift to mankind. Burns without his failings would almost certainly never have been the great man he was, the tremendous living force that he is to-day and will be for all time. Burns without varied experience of life would have been without versatility of knowledge and wide sympathetic outlook, and his poetry, comparatively speaking, would have been dull and character-less, and barren of any effect on national life, instead of moving nations to pathos and patriotism, and influencing, indeed compelling, social, ameliorative laws.

Burns' works are simple and easily understood, yet always vitally picturesque, whether he "ca's the Ewes to the Knowes," dissects a fraud as in "Holy Willie's Prayer," or visualises a lassie "Comin' thro' the Rye." He added new significance, greater worth, fresh beauty, sweeter fragrance to the things that are known and dear to every true man and woman. Also, many emotions capable of great uplifting influence, lying more or less dormant in our natures, which only stirred us vaguely, and has no influence on our life and conduct, he quickened and made con-scious vital forces.

Many of the dream things, the more or less visionary ideals of our waking thoughts, our castles in the air, he showed us are not so very far away, that they are of the earth, at our very doors, real, if only us would open our hearts to them, and appreciate them, and give them their place and influence in our daily lives. I do not intend to refer at any length to particular works of the poet, except two or three which reflect his personal experiences of life and in many respect- reveal the character of the man. I am sure there is no one here and com-paratively few elsewhere who have not read and felt their natures respond to the noble sentiments of "The Cottar's Saturday night." It is a record in great part of the poet's early home life and surroundings. I have seen attempts to play-act this poem on a stage - praiseworthy efforts no doubt. I do not know if this work has ever been set to music. I hope not. I do not think that any play-acting, however fine and natural, nor any music, however grand and solemn, could convey the rhythm, sense, and setting of this sublime production. It should never be painted. It requires no illustration even from a Raeburn or a Titian. It will endure alone, clear-cut, arresting, imperishable when the colours of even those great masters had faded. It is the very soul of Burns. Do not touch it. Read it by the quiet of your own fireside, and you will not fail to see the whole picture sparkling with finest character. I think this poem demonstrates, perhaps better than any other of his works, the genius

of Burns in his appreciation of the simple things of life. He derives no assistance here from 'Boast of Heraldry' or 'Pomp of Power,' circumstances which up till his time had great influence with the masses of his countrymen. Nor does he seek such help. On the contrary, there is nothing in this poem but the unpretentious life of a humble home, and what to the unthinking eye are the trivial attendant circumstances of their every-day life.

It was only genius that could bring together all the little incidents, the simple, natural sentiments of affection and sense that ruled this poor household, blend all together and lend to the whole a repose, a dignity and a beauty beyond compare.

'O Scotia: my dear, my native soil:

For whom my warmest wish to heaven is sent:

Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil,

Be blest with health, and peace, and sweet content.

And, O may Heaven their simple lives prevent

From Luxury's contagion, weak and vile,

Then howe'er crowns and coronets be rent,

A virtuous Populace may rise the while,

And stand a wall of fire around their much-lov'd Isle.'

Who has not felt the quaintness, the fascination, and the un-canniness of "Tam o' Shanter?" We are charmed with the romance Burns casts around this old-world scene and the old Scots worthiest gay of heart and light of care,

set in the genial glow of a Poosie Nancy Tavern. "Tam o' Shanter," Dr Glover proceeded, is a great and intricate conception, set forth with lucidity, logical sequence, and intense dramatic force. It will always be regarded as a great master-piece. Burns' life up to the time of his visit to Edinburgh, had been a more or less sequestered one. It had been spent on the farm, and almost all of his companions followed the same vocation as himself. But, although his life had been a quiet one, it had never been monotonous. We know from his writings that he could never have suffered from dullness or loneliness.

His mind was always receptive and responsive to every impression of Nature, animate or inanimate. Things had a meaning and a message for Burns that they did not convey to others less gifted. He revelled in wide expanses of Nature. He found powerful stirring of the soul in sequestered scenes and humble country homes.

Everything spoke to Burns. It is said in his communings with the things of earth and air, and sky, that he is often at his best. Burns and Nature are one. Listen to this example:-

"Ayr, gurgling, kiss'd his cobbled shore,

O'erhung with wild woods thick'ning green;

-The fragrant birch, and

hawthorn hoar

Twin'd amorous round the raptur'd scene;

The flowers sprang wanton to be prest,

The birds sang love on every spray;

Till too, too soon, the glowing west

Proclaimed the speed of winged day."

We feel here that the things of Nature are living, sympathising with Burns in his heartfelt cry - as if he had invested them with senses and soul to understand his grief, and share it. It is little wonder that a man who loved Nature in this way, had an almost affectionate regard for his fellow man, and that he had tolerance, compassion indeed, for the lowest ,created things. We see this in his address "To a Mouse,"

"I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
 And justifies that ill opinion,
 Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
 An' fellow-mortal:"

This poem is another example of Burns' humility, of which we are constantly reminded in his poems and prose writings. Like every man who loves Nature and lives near her, Burns was a humble-minded man. This production on the Mouse also demonstrates his exquisite sensibility to harmony. The whole poem breathes humility and the sweet and fragrant things that grow from the earth, the wild flowers with their panorama of hue amongst the verdure of field and foliage make a natural and charming setting.

It was in such surroundings, amidst what one might call the humiliations of Nature, that Burns, following his own humble toil, conceived this poem, a perfect picture in a perfect frame. Humility was as natural to Burns as the colours to the flowers, and as pure. It was never servile. On a New Year's morning, the poet goes first-footing the farmer's old horse, "Maggie." He addresses the old mare so kindly, so reminiscently of long ago dear domestic events that you might suppose he was speaking to an old human friend with whom in the happy careless days of boyhood he had

 paidl'd in the burn
 Frae morning sun till dine."

No one can read Burns' works without feeling that his spirit was traditionally akin to the rural life of Scotland, the wide-open, unaffected face of Nature, men and things. It was the scene of his immortality, his blood-environment, which had continually breathed inspiration into him, and of which he always retained imperishable memories. It seems to me a pity that Burns ever had to leave it all and take the road to Edinburgh, to join the gay throng there, with which, from: many points of view, by heredity and inclination, he was a stranger and had no sympathy. The Edinburgh visit had many picturesque features, but a practical question that has often occurred to me is whether the poet's experiences there were beneficial to him in anything that really mattered. I think many must have wondered whether it was in the best interests of this man of the people and his work, to leave his normal surroundings, his quiet life, and the friends of his own class who were perhaps more typical of their mother-earth, Scotland, than any other class in the land, and to find himself, so to speak, pitchforked into the smart society of the Scottish capital.

Burns knew himself well before he went to Edinburgh,
 The simple bard rough at the rustic plough,
 Learning his trade from every bough.
 To early independence bravely bred,
 By early poverty, to hardship steeled.

What did he find in Edinburgh? A brilliant throng, distinguished literary people of the period, charming men and women of the aristocracy, fashionable assemblies and private parties. No doubt from many, indeed from all, he received a cordial and sincere welcome. But Burns appears to have felt, as was perhaps inevitable in the circumstances, that the barriers of social taste, a marked influence of the period in almost every walk of life, were raised against him. I have no doubt the social differences were considerably, probably unwittingly, suggested to Burns, but the merest indication in that direction would not escape his keen, intensive mind.

In his own words, he beheld men "whose heart was not worth three-farthings, meet with attention and notice withheld from the son of genius and poverty," merely because he did not possess what some of the select coterie regarded as the correct degree of birth. He practically deserted the staid and smaller circles of Edinburgh society, and more or less abandoned himself to a very large section with whom Bacchanalian revelries were the vogue. It can cause no great surprise, that Burns, with his intense passion for human fellowship, coming from a life that was icy isolation compared with the gilded social whirl of Edinburgh, and subjected to hero-worship, drifted with the flattering crowd and did not heed much whither he drifted. In many respects it must have been a grateful and inspiring memory to the poet, his association with the many clever and cultured men and women he met, nearly all of whom have testified to his charming personality, and his rare and refreshing gifts of mind as revealed in his conversation. Many of them remained his friends through all the vicissitudes of his subsequent career.

I have referred to the Edinburgh period because it seems to me to mark a turning point in the poet's career. I think it had an unsettling and distracting effect on his whole after life. I consider it would have been better if he had continued to tread

"The lowly train in life's sequestered scene,"

and then, probably, the even, sustained, sublime flow of the Mossgiel period would have been maintained. But, unfortunately, he went to Edinburgh and became a hero, especially with the fast crowd, and he was ever after received as one in the social circles he frequented in the Ellisland and Dumfries periods of his life. If I could say any one circumstance in his life was regrettable, I would point to this combination of hero-worship and conviviality. I do not suggest it ruined his character, far from it. Nothing could do that. It ruined his health and shortened his days. It added zest to his already strong passion for conviviality, to which he now became more addicted. But still his work in by far the greater part rang true, noble, tender, earnest for human weal. I think Burns' critical reflections on his Edinburgh life certainly did not satisfy his own mind. I believe the iron entered his soul as a result of his experiences there, and afterwards because of the bitterness towards him of the prosperous burghers of Dumfries, on account of his political activities, and his sympathy with the slogan of the French Revolution.

'Liberty, equality, fraternity,' is merely a catchy cry in some respects, but it contains many seeds of fine poetic beauty and lofty practical idealism that were bound to appeal, particularly to Burns. It was probably his critical reflections on these experiences of the Edinburgh and Dumfries periods of his life that brought forth "For a'

that, and a' that." This poem was written a considerable time after the events to which I have just referred,

when probably all bitterness had passed from the Poet's remembrance, and with a calm mind he contrasted much that Was and still is hollow and ephemeral in man, the trappings of perverted pride, with what is real and estimable, fortunately a much greater quantity, which must endure and grow in influence, because while man dies and his name and personality may be forgotten, his good deeds, even his little unostentatious acts, live on through all succeeding generations, radiant, beneficent forces, as an important civilising document, because from greater, more wide-spread recognition real worth in man, we pass by easy transition to wider appreciation of intrinsic worth in all things that man gives to the world: in art, literature, music, science, his domestic, social, and business relations, in all the things that make for greater worth in the soul of a nation and advance civilisation and the reasonable brotherhood of man. These two vital forces must progress together. This poem is at once the most enduring tribute, and the most stirring call to manly independence, pride of worth, and strong faith in the future of the race that ever was penned. No wonder it carries world-wide ever-growing influence. In such poems, Burns no doubt hurt the feelings of some friends who had treated him not unkindly, but no personal or selfish consideration ever entered into his calculations when the welfare of mankind was at stake, and ' he always fearlessly expressed the view that his heart dictated. There was a very tender attachment, and I believe from a consideration of nearly all the available history on the affair, a pure attachment Burns formed in Edinburgh, the memory of which clung to him through all his subsequent life, and which the lady also cherished to her dying day. I refer to the celebrated friendship between the poet and Clarinda, a charming and cultured woman whom he first met in Edinburgh. Two of the tenderest poems that ever were written, 'My Nannie's Away and 'Ae Fond Kiss,' are the outcome, the partial outcome of that friendship. Although they frequently corresponded, they hardly ever met again after Burns left Edinburgh. In 'My Nannie's Awa" there rings through the whole song a plaintive cry like the lonely wailing note of a bereaved bird in the silent woods. The poet brings into play in this poem, all the things that might be expected to charm away the most poignant grief, the beauties of the woodlands and the fields in all the freshness of a spring morning, swelling buds, balmy air, lambkins bleating on the braes, the birds at their songs in "ilka green shawl" things to which we inevitably turn for new hope, brighter thoughts, and yet every word, every line, the whole refrain of the song is tinged with sadness,

"The snawdrap and primrose our woodlands adorn,
And violets bathe in the weet o' the morn:
They pain my sad bosom, sae sweetly they blaw,
They mind me o' Nannie — and Nannie's awa'"

This is a short poem, almost contemporaneous with 'For A.', that, an' a' that,' but short as it is, how much does it not suggest to us? It represents to us some of the last drops from a pure, prolific fountain, now running dry.

It was written when he realised that his health was fast failing him, about one and a half years before his death. He was thinking, probably, of the incidents of his own tragic life, his wayward life, and with Burns retrospect always sublimed his soul. His life had been a mixture of sweetness and sadness. So is this song. I think he was speaking what he thought might possibly be his last fond message, not only to Clarinda, but to all mankind. And while the sad refrain no doubt conveys his last lingering regrets for one he had loved and lost, a fragrant memory, it also reflects the state of mind which marked his closing years.

"Me nae cheerfu' twinkle lights me,
Dark despair around benights me."

The tremendous expenditure of nervous energy in a genius such as Burns is inevitably followed by depressions, both mental and bodily, as no doubt he had found from experience. What he had feared long years before had come to pass:—

"But, och! I back and cast my e'e on prospects drear;
An' forward, tho' I canna see, I guess an' fear."

It is always interesting and instructive to look into the mind of a genius like Burns. The psychology of Burns will always remain an attractive — perhaps I should also say — a speculative study. Not that his conduct matters much, either to you or to me. I am sure we just gratefully accept the good that was in him, idealise him for the noble message he gave to mankind,

"Chide not with the past
But feel the present."

The worst that was in Burns, which more or less is in us all, was insignificant in him compared with his virtues. Simple things such as "Auld Lang Syne" and "John Anderson, my Jo" with their cheery reminiscence of the endearing events of life's journey, their studied forgetfulness of any jarring note and their happy peal of joy o'er all - even in the gathering gloom towards the end of the long day, have done much for good-will and forgiveness amongst people. Surely we can think of Burns as he thought towards all his fellowmen.

Not only in this dear land, but in far flung places of this earth, in different continents separated by wide seas, wherever Scotsmen gather, Burns is remembered to-night, and their thoughts turn to the Motherland. The light from the Cottar's window is still shining and will for ever. It is seen, its influence is felt in many lands besides Scotland. It reaches across the oceans into the crowded streets of great cities and into quiet far-sequestered homes. It has guided men in difficult times as surely as the beacon light has guided the storm-tossed ships from the darkness, and the turbulent waters, into a peaceful sheltering harbour. How sad to think that Burns was cut off at an age when most men only start their life-work. There are countless things more for a Burns to do, and no one has arisen since his time to carry on the great work. There is still an untold wealth of purist sentiment in our natures, more unsearchable than the treasures of the earth and the ocean, and of infinitely more value, because it is the well-spring of every lovable quality in man, and of all his useful activities. There are many notes that have never yet been struck on the chords of our nature. Burns wrote the richest, tenderest,

most inspiring melodies of human kindness, love, humility, liberty, patriotism. There are still many more stored away in the human heart. Will they ever be sung and our lives further enriched, refreshed and charmed? Is there another Burns on the lap of Time and Providence? Who knows? Is it vain to expect so much? Probably it is, and yet what has been may be again. The world has changed much since Burns' time, but there are still many poor homes on the hill sides, aye, and even in the slums of our great cities, where live people of simple faith, who have their struggle against poverty and adversity, but win through unaided, living industrious, frugal, happy, contented, honourable lives, untainted by the grosser features of the intense commercialism of this age. It is there the impressionable talented boy may be born. He would just be like the old Burns, the man who often looked into heaven, occasionally fell to the allurements of earth, and yet, everything considered, presents perhaps the most attractive, the most lovable, the most intensely human personality the world has ever seen. So far, there has been only one Burns. We may be thankful that there has been even one. I hope you will not allow any erroneous views, or poor, feeble words of mine, to detract from the solemn pride every Scotsman should feel in this toast. I now give you The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.