

JAMES McMURDO IMMORTAL MEMORY (1929).

The toast of "The Immortal Memory" was proposed by Mr. James McMurdo of Johnstone Bridge, who is a son of Mr. Peter McMurdo, who for a long period carried on a joiner's business in Dumfries.

In proposing the toast, Mr. McMurdo said that in asking him to deliver the oration in that ancient hostelry so often visited by the bard, they had conferred on him a great honour. And yet there was a certain sort of fitness that a McMurdo should be honoured in connection with the day they celebrated, for, was not John McMurdo, one of the speaker's forbears, a great friend of Burns — living — while he found himself a great lover of Burns and his works in this year of grace, 1929: In giving that toast, his endeavour would be to get them all in communion, with hearts beating in unison of love for Burns. Burns owed much of his poetic instinct to his mother, Agnes Brown, who was undoubtedly a poetess. Next after his mother in the making of the poet, was the scenery of his native land. Scotsmen, he was aware, in expatiating on the beauty of their native land, were apt to exaggerate a little. But where in all the world could one find such grandeur of scenery as in Scotland? Indeed, born amidst such beauty as hill and dale presented, it was surprising that every Scot was not a poet and that the world was not flooded with Scotch poetry. Burns, anyhow, responded to the inspiring influences of beautiful and sublime around him, and flowered out grandly as a poet. The political condition of Scotland during the eighteenth century helped also to develop the poetical genius of him whose birth we celebrate to—night. From the Union of the Crowns, Scotland had become an over—looked country, and till Burns was sent to us we had fallen quite into obscurity. In fact, the existence of our country would have been unknown except from an occasional jog being given to the outside world by a riot or a Jacobite rising. "Just when our Scottish dialect was on the wane, Burns's voice was heard from Land's end to John o' Groat's House, reasserting Scotland's claim to national existence." England, 150 years ago, hated Scotland and all things Scottish, and was determined if possible to de—nationalise the little Northern Kingdom if she could. Englishmen despised Scotsmen, and Scotsmen seemed ashamed of themselves and their country. A century of religious strife, the extinction of her parliament, the severe suppression of the Jacobite rebellions, the removal of all symbols of her loyalty and nationality had all but quenched the national spirit. The Scotch nobles and ruling classes of Burns's day were a miserable mongrel lot, with as much patriotism in their milk and water souls as the black—faced sheep on their hills. They thought it just the thing to become Londonised, and spend there in riotous living the money wrung from their poor serfs in the North. They were willing and even plotted to blot the word Scotland from the map, but

The best laid schemes o' mice and men  
Gang aft agley,  
An' lea'e us nocht but grief and pain  
For promised joy.

Though patriotism was at a low ebb amongst the upper classes in Scotland, it was not so amongst the lower. The peasantry of the land kept green in their memory, the struggle of their fathers both for civil and religious liberty. They had, however, to speak in whispers when speaking of the relations of the two kingdoms. But a better day was dawning. The seed of old national history, dropped in his cradle by Agnes Brown in ballad form, sprouted forth grandly and made the poet's pen more powerful than the sword of Wallace, more deadly than the battle axe of Bruce. Wen traitor knave and coward slave were bowing and becking before "my lord this" and "my leddy that" in England, and were ashamed of the land they came from, our poet, weeding in the

barley field, was a Scot still and "turned the weeder's clips aside and spared the symbol dear." The thistle was very dear to him. But sparing the thistle and wetting it with his tears, he knew would serve the cause of his country but little. He knew he must devise something that would arouse his countrymen from their lethargy and restore their dignity, and so he prayed that he "for puir auld Scotia's sake, some usefu' plan or book could make, or sing a sang at least." The song was sung. It welled up from his soul like the sobbing, sorrow-ful patriotic outburst of the Hebrews by the waters of Babylon, and, wandering over the hills and lingering in the valley and reverberating from the mountains, it awakened the dying soul of Scotland "frae Maidenkirck to John o' Groats." "Scots wha hae wit Wallace bled" was that song, and this noble effort would have immortalised the Ayrshire ploughboy if he had never composed another. The Marseillaise Hymn revolutionised France; Luther's Hymn enfranchised Germany; Yankee Doodle, with its contemptuous iteration, drove the British arms out of America; and "Scots wha hae" is more potent than Magna Carta. This noble song gives expression to the inwardness of all worthy Scotsmen to-day, as it did in the first days it was sung; it makes the patriotic fire burn "in the bones" and sparkle in the eyes. It helps to keep the spirit of human liberty alive in the world as few other songs can do; in Scotland it has enthused a new life into the body politic, and a life, -Goo, that will not (lie with the centuries coming. never again will Scotsmen be ashamed of their country, but will proudly sing of all things Scotch as the bonniest and best in all the British Isles. The preachers of the Kirk, too, had a hand in the making of our poet. I am not going to abuse them. It seems to be a standing rule with a certain class of orators on these anniversary occasions, to give a kick or two to men of whom they are apparently as ignorant as a frog is of astronomy. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the course of an address at a gathering similar to this, said:- "He came, and the ranting, canting hypocritic auld gospel bigots hung their heads down to avoid him. He came down upon them like a thunderbolt, and cleared the air with his lightning." That sort of stuff might pass. I say only "might" pass, as a boy's composition at school, but it is not history. It is simply the ranting, canting ravings of either a narrow bigot or an ignoramus. The "auld licht" ministers of Scotland of Burns's day, were neither bigots nor hypocrites as a class. They were the equal in learning, in liberality, in piety of any ministers in Christendom. They were the stuff of which the Covenanters were made. It was their "thunder" and "lightning" that cleared the air morally, intellectually, and spiritually, and not that of Burns. It was they who by their churches, schools, and colleges formed the Scottish character into granite sturdiness and manly independence. It was they who made the Sabbath a holy day and family worship universal throughout the land. It was they who made it possible for our poet to pen "The Cottar's Saturday Night." It was they who made Scotland "loved at home and revered abroad." It was they who produced all that was beautiful in the home life of the lowly in the days of Burns, and enabled him to sing "from scenes like these auld Scotia's grandeur springs." Shame therefore, on the spouters who insult Scotsmen at these gatherings by making an exhibition of their ignorance at the expense of the grand old fathers of the Church of Scotland. But the ministers of a hundred and fifty years ago made a very big mistake indeed — a mistake that was everywhere common. They neglected a very large part of man's nature — the part related to this world — while they strained to the utmost to exalt that related to the other. I mean that, while they worked hard to lift their fellows up to God and heaven, they ignored as sinful all the instincts of the heart, joys of the imagination, and social relationships of life. And as for the social joys and pleasures of poor humanity, they felt they were from above rather

than from below. The result was Burns. He sang out from Nature's heart. The people heard him with rapture, and he has been to them ever since Nature's High Priest revealing to them "visions from the hills and the souls of lonely places." But natural scenery, the religion, political and social conditions of his country, capped by the charms of his bonnie Jean, did not of themselves make the poet Robert Burns. The root of the matter was in himself; these simply helped to draw it out. He was born a poet, and the best, in some respects, God ever gave to cheer by song this "vale of tears." He was no book—made rhymers. His poetry is no mere surface sparkling froth. In his soul the muses placed a budding spring of pure poetry. We thank the Giver of all good for Robert Burns. The world is richer to—day because of him.