

E. ROSSLYN MITCHELL — IMMORTAL MEMORY (1930).

Mr. Mitchell, in an eloquent address, proposing "The Immortal Memory," said: I need hardly say to you how very high I hold the distinction of having been invited to come and speak with you to—night in this historic place, about Robert Burns. If I had highly developed psychic qualities, I think I should feel the impact of this centre as a spiritual experience which would remain with me throughout all my life, and perhaps afterwards. This howff has been to me, since I was a small boy, a centre to which my thoughts perpetually return, but I never liked it — I have hated it. It is the one aspect of the life and message of Robert Burns which has always struck me — with the ideas and temperament which I possess — as being distasteful and odious, and I am very glad that we are gradually passing away from the idea that we celebrate best our honour of a man by perpetuating his vices. But I come here to—night to speak with you as fairly as I commune with myself, not to make an oration, not to pretend that I, with my restricted experience and talents, can ever be the channel through which the vast dynamic power of Robert Burns can freely flow. But I come to you at first as a stranger, but now in a more fraternal spirit, to talk with you in this howff about the man and his message and his method. Robert Burns is one of the great facts of human life; he is one of the great universal facts of human life; he is one of those events in human history in which seems to be summed up all the growth of the past, merely as manure for fructifying of new flowers for the future. In the course of the history of the human race, men and women, from time to time, arise like vast human peaks amid low lying hills. They are perhaps partly the results of events that have preceded them — they become the roots of the future of humanity. And the world can never be the same as it was before Robert Burns lived and wrought. The little book, the Kilmarnock edition of his works, was one of the dynamic books of human history. I think that sometimes we are inclined to measure the power of a book or the power of an author, by quantity and not by quality, but the Kilmarnock edition takes rank with two other books as the great dynamic writings of our race. The New Testament, which can be contained in even smaller bulk, and the four Gospels of which can be contained in half that bulk, -and which narrate events all of which took place in thirty-five days of history, is the greatest dynamic book which has ever appeared. "The Social Contract," by Jean Jaques Rousseau, which can be comfortably accommodated in 100 pages of that size of book, was the second great dynamic of human literature and human life. Poems, chiefly in the Scottish dialect, is the third. I will not speak to you to-night of Robert Burns as a man, save in so far as I might regard it necessary to think of him as a man, because of the product of his reaction to circumstances. The whole drama of human life is a reaction and interaction of the human unit with the universal environment. We ordinary folk are apt to regard the human unit, vivified with the idea, as a poor helpless creature, weak and feeble, struggling vainly against a great mass of inertia, or even a great moving force. We always speak of a man as if he were a puny thing, struggling against a great powerful organism. but if we have in our minds a true conception of a living universe, we shall change our point of view. A man with an idea which he can embody and personify in his mind and spirit, far from being a weak and puny thing, is in fact the most powerful thing of which the universe knows. He is like a speck of radium in a heap of slag. He might to the outward eye appear small—minded and feeble, but there is that within him, which by its own natural spontaneous dynamic power, permeates the whole mass of inertia, until inertia, without knowing it, becomes itself revived by the power of his spirit. And we to—night, in the year 1930, are what we are unconsciously, but nevertheless most definitely, because Robert Burns lived and wrote and sent his message permeating the whole of the human race.

Proceeding, Mr. Mitchell spoke of the analytical investigations which had been made from time to time into the life and thought of the poet, and said: What we do not yet know and what we cannot know unless we be Robert Burns ourselves, is the impulse that restively remained within his soul, and found expression through his brain. We may know something of the brain, but few of us can contact the mind which is behind the brain, and of which the brain is but the machinery. But what we do know about him is this, that more than any other man who ever lived in the tide of time, he has become the personal possession of folk of every rank and caste and colour and creed. What we do know is that his birthday, when first he came to dwell among men, is, with one exception, celebrated more universally and with more fervour and real enthusiasm, than the birthday of any other man. What we do know is that, more than any other man who ever lived, he is honoured in bronze and marble and stone. This is not merely a cult, it is not swank, it is a definite expression, an expression of a form of hero worship, not only for a man but also for his message, and every statue and every memorial that is erected to Robert Burns, signifies a wider acceptance of his message to humanity. What was that message? In 1930, to speak of what Robert Burns gave to the world, is to speak of things that are normally accepted and acknowledged by every one of our race, but at the same time, it is to speak of things, every one of which was a challenge at the time when he uttered them. I know that last year in the proposal of this toast here, reference was made to Robert Burns as a teacher or as a cleaner of religion. So he was, but hose, even in my young days, who regarded the satires of Burns affecting matters of religion as a sign and token of an irreligious mind, misunderstood entirely their purpose and their meaning. Robert Burns was no rustic clown kicking up his heels against orthodoxy and respectability. I do not believe there is a boy of seventeen in the whole of Scotland to—day, who has read more deeply than Robert Burns read at seventeen, and as for some of the literature he read and studied, I question if the brains of the boys of seventeen would be capable of reading more than a few pages of it. Robert Burns had within him, and this, I think, was his great genius, the perception of absolute truth, and when he found that the truth of religion was stifled by forms and phrases and ceremony and ritual, which were accepted as the essential things, while virtue languished, honour was besmirched, and 'manhood tarnished and womanhood contaminated and childhood destroyed, he blazed out, as every great fire blazes out, not to destroy that which was pure, but to consume the garbage with which it was surrounded. -Burns could put in six lines of poetry or verse, the whole of the theory of foreordination and predestination, concerning which theologians have written volumes of dialectics. Was any man ignorant of the truth of religion, either in thought or expression, who could see in a Holy Willie, who was honoured with place and position, and regarded as a pattern and example, nothing but a dirty, canting humbug and hypocrite? Burns was a man that looked with the eyes of the spirit straight to the very heart of truth. He saw in the Holy Fair, a rite which should have had within it the very essence of the union of the soul of God with man, disgusting, odious blasphemies, and with a burning pen he held up to those who loved the Lord, the awful condition which, by their neglect and adherence to ceremony, as against the power of the Spirit, they had allowed the rite to sink. The man who did that was vital with the very truth of the relation—ship of the soul to God. And the man who, in the eighteenth century, in the time of the Georges, could look upon all the political corruption and the social tyranny, the intellectual snobbery, the religious folly, and the intellectual stupidity of the people, and bring them all to a realisation of the fundamental essence of human character and human ideals, was one of the great social reformers and political forces of his time. In a time of artificiality, classical perfection, icily regular and splendidly null, he could see

the unity of life expressed in a hill or crag; he could see the unity of life expressed in a running stream or a flowering thorn, and could bring from the world of instinct into the realm of sensitive intelligence, the daisy, the field mouse, the wild flower, the wounded hare, the old mare, the old ewe, and a hundred other things. Such a man was a man who had a clearer perception of the real unity of a living universe, than any man of his time. In an artificial age, surrounded and almost stifled by all manner of human creations, that beat back the essential purposes of man, he was able to dis-sociate himself from all the humbug and artificiality, and stereotyped expression, and come right down to the simple heart of things.

And what was Burns' message? It was a message from the heart of the Scottish people to folk who have been, and ever will be, kintra folk, simple minded folk, folk who believe that the simple things are the essential things. Proceeding, Mr Mitchell spoke of pride of race, and that higher pride which made, a man biggest when he stood on his manhood. When one stood upon his manhood, he said, he was bigger than when he stood upon his pride of race or love of city. Indeed, when one took that view, it did not matter about one's race or creed, or whether one was learned or un-tutored, one was 'a man for a' that,' and as men they became brothers. It was essential at that moment, by a peculiar paradox, that one became greatest as an individual. Illustrating his point by drawing a picture of Robert Burns in Dumfries, leaving Lord Gordon to go to speak to a man in rags, and, on being rebuked, saying: "good God, Sir, it wisna' his clathes I was talki' tae", the speaker said that there was Burns' message - that every single unique unit had qualities in himself. Speaking of Burns' method of expression, Mr. Mitchell said that to—day he was very much criticised for his style, by those superior persons who had lost some of their national instinct by contamination with others, but his style was as spontaneous as his message was spontaneous. Continuing Mr. Mitchell said: When you are dealing with prose you should be cold, hard steel, but when you are dealing with poetry, you should be molten iron. The one is of the brain, the other of the soul. You may twist and direct the brain, and by so doing make it better. The study of mathematics is an excellent thing for developing the brain, but I never knew any man become more spiritual or more soulful by doing either logarithms or euclid. Those fellows who have just stopped taking their secondary classes in versification and sit with a higher grade book on English literature and poetry by their side, dare to come up and try with their flimsy nets to suppress the great eagle of poetry soaring from the crags to the sun. In illustration of Burns' perfection in relating the rhythm of his verse to the rhythm of actions portrayed, and the atmosphere of his verse to the atmosphere of the scenes he pictured, Mr. Mitchell recited, with appropriate gesture and dramatic emphasis, several well known excerpts from the poet's writings. "Burns," he concluded, "was a simple—minded, emotional, God—fearing, home—loving, sensitive, rhythmical man." As was the man, so was his message. It radiates kindness, gentleness, quality of spirit, forgiveness and understanding. And it is in this simplicity and simple—mindedness that he touches the real essence of human life:

"To make a happy, fireside clime
For weans and wife,
That is the true pathos and sublime
Of human life."

Whether in Dumfries or Dumbarton, Milngavie or Montreal, Pekin or Pernambuco, it does not matter. We have here a great poet, a great evangelist of the enduring essential thing of life, so that when we come and stand in his presence,

we feel. all the tawdriness and the artificiality drop from us, and we say: "Brother, thanks, we will remember you all our days." Because of that, I ask you to honour the memory of Robert Burns.

The toast was pledged in silence, and, thereafter, Mr. Mitchell was accorded a great ovation.