

Rev. JOHN McQUITTY — IMMORTAL MEMORY. (1932).

In properling "The Immortal Memory," Mr. McQuitty, after expressing his sense of the honour done him in asking him to propose the toast, and his sense of unfitness, the more so as he was an Irishman, said: The Years that have intervene since the termination of the Great War, have been heavily freighted with destiny for many nations. We have been passing through the experience of a moral and social upheaval. The foundations of our civilisation have seemed to sway. The old landmarks and standards have been obliterated. Never before has there been a more clamant demand for a clear clarion note of guidance and leadership than to—day. I desire to suggest to you that the message of Burns as revealed in his poems and letters, are of supreme value in solving –the problems and perplexities that surge round the individual and the nation at the present moment. I suggest further to you that if we could translate into deeds, his teaching that

"For a' that and a' that,
It's comin' yet for a' that,
That man to man the world o'er
Shall bruthers be for aa' that."

there would be an end to wars in inter-national relationships and of dispute in the commercial and industrial life of the community. If we could learn to preserve the dignity of man with soul erect, we would realise to the full that heaven—born spirit of independence which should be the heritage of everyone born into the world. If we could re—paint the picture that he draws of a Scottish working home on a Saturday night, and make it representative of our homes to—day, we would have gone far not only to solve most of the difficulties which confront us in our social and domestic life, but to make our country loved at home, revered abroad.

It is a great gift to a nation when a man is born within it who can see visions. It is a greater and more valuable gift when a man appears who has vision. But the greatest and most precious gift to any people, is a man who not only has vision, but who has also the supreme faculty of revealing and imparting his vision to those among whom he dwells, and through them to a succeeding generation. Such a

man was Robert Burns. The years that have elapsed since his death, have only increased his worth to humanity. He can teach us elemental values. His heart beat close and true to nature. She whispered to him her innermost secrets. He broadcast them with notes both clear and musical. To all who care to listen to his singing, his message penetrates into the deepest recesses of their souls. It would be a keen pleasure to me, and I am sure profitable and enjoyable for us all, if we spent our time this evening, wandering through the garden of his .genius, 7athering and garnering among the beautiful flowers planted by his mine. We would recall, doubtless, his wondrous love for bird and beastie, tale irresistible appeal of his advocacy of the brotherhood of man, and the haunting sweetness of his peerless songs , with their universal note of appeal to all mankind. We might journey with him to witness the remarkable triumph of his poetry and his prsonality in the company of the noble and learned in Edina, Scotia's darling seat, or we might linger with him along the nearby banks of the Nth, on that day when his wife found him agonised with an ungovernable joy, the tears rolling down his cheeks as he recited aloud the immortal "Tam o' Shanter," which he had just composed. Or we might quicken our mutual sympathies with the memory of the tragic shortness of his sojourn.

Among his fellows calling to remembrance the sharpness of his satire, the depth of his gratitude and the magnitude of his understanding as we worshipped in wonder at the evidence of his genius. I wish, however, to take a more prosaic course, I desire merely to emphasise the debt which Scotland and the whole world owe to the Poet. The late Lord Roseberry, in one of his inimitable appreciations of Burns, laid it down as incontrovertible that the final test of literary genius, is whether or not a writer's works will be read and appreciated a hundred years after his death. Judged by this standard, the tribunal of posterity has pronounced Burns to be one of the outstanding writers of the 18th century. With characteristic dogmatism, Thomas Carlyle goes further and proclaims him as the most gifted British soul in that century. When we examine critically and dispassionately the claim made by these two distinguished Scotsmen, for their fellow-countryman, we must admit it is not an exaggeration to his position. Burns occupied a unique place in the history of poetic literature. In his own peculiar sphere, he had no predecessor, and he has had no successors. This evening, after 173 years, his birthday is being observed more widely than that of any other human being. Scotland is paying her homage to his memory, and wherever Scotland's sons and daughters are to be found, his name will be honoured and his fame proclaimed. This is fitting, for while mankind owes him much, Scotland especially is his debtor. He exalted Scotland and the Scottish people. He made the Scottish tongue immortal. When he began to sing of the rugged grandeur of his country, or the prowess of his race, Scotland was on the point of lapsing into obscurity. The Scottish spirit was in danger of dying. Her national independence was well nigh forgotten, and the Scottish vernacular was falling into disuse. Burns re-asserted Scotland's claim to independence, he revived and set to music the spirit of the Scottish people, and he preserved in the songs and poems, the Scottish tongue for all time. While, however, it is impossible to exaggerate the debt that Scotsmen owe to Burns, we must not forget that his name is more than the watchword of a nation. Others cannot be denied their share in the legacy which he bequeathed to the world. There is a universal note in his singing, which enables him to interpret the heart of humanity, and has given him as an audience the whole of mankind. This influence extends over a greater domain than any empire that the world has seen. His spirit pervades the whole world, so that wherever our language is spoken, he is

Making his appeal to the imagination of men. One evidence of the universality of his message is the manner in which men of widely divergent interests and opinions, are accustomed to apply his poetry to the political controversies and industrial and social disputes of to-day. Pacifists and militarists have sought support for their ideals in his writings. His verses have been quoted by the disciples, both of Capitalism and Communism. But because of this universal note in his singing, we ought to be slow to drag him down from his high place as a prophet and seer, to satisfy our personal predilections. In seeking to appraise the writings and interpret the message of Burns, it is not easy to do so without recalling the personality of the Poet, and passing some verdict upon him as an individual. Three courses are open to us. Like the man with the muck rake in "Pilgrim's Progress," we may go grubbing about among the inaccurate and trifling records of his life, accepting as true the rumours and lies that have been discredited and disproved. On the other hand, not content with warm appreciation of his genius, we may seek to canonise him, claiming for him a place among the Saints of Scotland — a rare but select band: But those of us who love his memory and worship at his shrine, are unwilling to include ourselves either the foolish eulogists or un-charitable detractors of the Poet. We do not wish to either to conceal or minimise his lapses, but what we wish to recall in the life of Burns, is his faith in and

sympathy for his fellow—men, his spirit of independence, his tenderness and his tolerance of everything save self—righteousness, bigotry and lack of charity. We think of him battling with adversity, buffeted and crippled by circumstances, but never completely conquered.

I am afraid that I have strayed a considerable distance from the things that I had intended to say. Let me, in a few concluding sentences, endeavour to make amends. There was never a time in the history of the world and of our nation, when the message and spirit of Burns were more needed than they are to—day. We need his spirit of sturdy independence, his faith in humanity, his sympathy and tender charity, if we are to rid our souls and the souls of our fellows of the unbrotherliness and suspicion, of the malice and jealousy that are poisoning the fountains of life. Let those of us who honour his memory remember that we have still our part to play. We have to do our best to make the vision that he has imparted to us a reality. We have to strive to "preserve the dignity of man with soul erect" — surely the noblest and hardest task given to mankind. We must take the jewel of his genius from the secret places of our souls and cash it in the market place — in our national life, in our civic life, and above all, in our private life. We need to sing not only with his words, but with his spirit:—

"Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a' that;
That sense and worth, o'er a' the earth,
Shall bear the gree for a' that.
For a' that and a' that,
It's coming yet for a' that,
That man to man the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.

If we shall do these things, many crooked paths will be made straight, many rough places plain, much unscrupulous striving for wealth and power will cease, and "the dignity of man with soul erect" will become more apparent day by day.

Rise with me as I give you the toast of "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns" who gave his land her sweetest songs, and earth her saddest story. The toast was pledged in silence.