

DR PATRICK McGLYNN IMMORTAL MEMORY (1934) .

Dr McGlynn, in submitting the toast of "The Immortal Memory," said they were met that night to celebrate the memory of a humble ploughman, who died in Dumfries almost one hundred and forty years ago, whose genius as a poet could truthfully be described as one of the greatest gifts that God had bestowed upon the Scottish nation. He yielded to no man in his passionate love of this prince of poets. If they had any fear that, because of his calling, he was going to treat the Poet's works in a dry—as—dust academic fashion, happily their fears were groundless. Burns himself held in the greatest abhorrence, those who would attempt to apply to poetry, the cold, formal standards of technical criticism. They would remember his words when he once heard such a pedant in Edinburgh, dissecting in this fashion, Gray's "Elegy," of which Burns was passionately fond. "Sir," he said, "I now perceive a man may be an excellent judge of poetry by square and rule, and after all be a damned blockhead." Those words were only too true; for it was quite possible for a man to be considered the greatest authority on some purely technical, literary or linguistic matters, and yet to have no more soul for poetry than a turnip. No; the poetry of Burns was written from the heart; it is the outpouring of a great soul enshrining in imperishable form, the basic truths, the fundamental thoughts, the elemental passions, which are true for all time of the whole universal world, and of the heart of each individual man. From the heart they were written; from the heart must come our response. Not that we need fear for one moment the application of those critical standards of forms and language which he had mentioned; for here they had that union of perfect thought and perfect expression, which could be moulded only in the minds of the greatest geniuses in their greatest moments. Yet he would strongly claim that such purely verbal criticism should always be a secondary, a very secondary, and never a primary consideration in dealing with the work of any great poet. The poems of Virgil, of Shakespeare, of Dante, of Burns, were not written to provide the grubber in language—forms with a mine of material for learned tomes on etymology. No; they were the messages of the great seers and prophets of the world to their fellowmen, for their guidance, their instruction, and their inspiration, in their toilsome journey along the highway of life. Yet if Burns had genius, they must not imagine for one moment that he looked upon that as absolving him from man's universal ordinances of labour. Spontaneous and natural as were the effusions of his poetic soul, he never neglected the necessary labour of the file. He himself informed them of that. "All my poetry is the effect of easy composition, but of laborious correction." He was intensely proud of his craft, he took his mission as a poet most seriously. His mental vitality had immense powers of assimilation and transfusion; his mind was constantly absorbing from his experience of life, and the product of each finished effort was a masterpiece. Direct and deliberate imitation, except perhaps in the early stages of such a poet's development, was unneeded. His poems were struck off while his inspiration was at white heat, and, if they now, in the light of cool judgment, found a certain wonderful beauty and symmetry of form and expression, it was well to remember that the Poet himself, at that moment, was hardly conscious of them in detail. He was completely absorbed in producing a perfect masterpiece of the very highest art, and all such beauties, all such excellences, were inevitable. The Poet at that moment would have been quite incapable of descending from his lofty heights. It was the work of a man inspired. It had become almost an axiom in the history of literature, and, indeed, in the history of progress, that poverty and genius were generally to be found closely allied. In the case of Burns, a great deal had been said about his struggles and hardships. If the truth were told, he dared say the present

materialistic age would treat such a poet with at least as great unkindness. Personally, he thought, that those great difficulties and obstacles actually proved a potent stimulus in the development of his literary powers. They were not there concerned with the futilities so common in certain quarters to-day, that were literally without either rhyme or reason, so much so that sometimes one's only guide as to whether it was prose or verse, was whether the print in each line went right on to the end of the page or not. Without suffering, the Poet could never have had that universal appeal that was founded on the inevitable truth of his words; he could never have had that deep insight into the springs of human life and action, that rendered his work really great. It is suffering, too, that sweetens; and the joy that is its reward is the purest joy of all. They saw that in the quality of the work written by Burns, especially in his happiest moments. Burns, in the firmament of poetry, was a star of the very :.greatest magnitude. His power of concentrated and compressed description in many of his poems, was almost unsurpassed in the literature of the world. With the masterly hand of the great artist, he could delineate both men and things in a few incisive strokes, that impressed themselves at once on the reader's mind, and preserved for him an indelible picture of the persons or events portrayed. He could crystallise in words and phrases, of simple nature in themselves, but compelling in their choice and arrangement, all the passions and emotions of the human heart. On every page, in every line, they felt the direct human appeal. That was why, as he had said, Burns could not possibly have ever brought himself to imitate that school of affectation in poetry (so popular to-day), which sought to create a sudden striking sensation, and to attain an ephemeral success, by performing some extra-ordinary and quite unexpected feats of linguistic acrobatics. That was why, too, one was struck by the tremendous intensity of his best work. And it was in face of such overwhelming evidence of outstanding genius, that it seemed superfluous and almost presumptuous for himself, or any other literary specialist, to speak of his achievement and his worth.

He felt towards him as the ancient Latin critic did towards Virgil, when he recorded his judgment of him in words which he should attempt to paraphrase to Burns:-

"To praise can add fresh glory to his name;
No carping critic can bedim his fame,
Short though his life, his praise lives ages long,
Peerless he stands, auld Scotia's Prince of Song."

It had always been astonishing to him how many people in this country had no knowledge of the amazing wealth and beauty of Scotland's heritage of poetry and song. They, for example, had no conception of the extra—ordinary virility, freshness and originality, of the early writers like Henryson, Barbour, Dunbar, to say nothing of Fergusson and Ramsay. Speaking as one whose life had been spent in reading the finest masterpieces in both ancient and modern languages, he knew of no poetry to surpass in beauty, pathos, and sweetness, the lyric poetry of Scotland — and in that department especially, the position of Robert Burns was one of absolutely unchallenged pre—eminence. The extra—ordinary emotional effect produced by the sound of the words in those beautiful, expressive, broad vowels of the Scottish language, was in itself a magic music, that haunted the heart and thrilled the soul and held their senses spell—bound. Such was the power that was exercised over the minds of men, by the perfect combination of sound and sense in the words alone. But when

there was added to them those irresistably sweet tunes, then there existed no other artistic expression of the genius of mankind, that could completely transport them from their cold earthly surroundings to a world radiant with beauty, harmony and love. For the preservation and the popularisation of those melodies Scotland owed to Burns a debt beyond estimate, and, at the same time, it was to many of these Lowland and Highland folk tunes, that the genius of Burns owed its inspiration for some of its very highest flights of poetry. They were met to do honour to a noble mind, that dealt with every aspect of human life, and left this whole world the richer for that transforming touch. They celebrated the masterly genius of the Poet who excelled in so many branches of Poetic thought and expression, unrivalled in epigram and deadly in his power of satire, overflowing with sweetness and pathos in describing the tender qualities and endearing charm of lovely women, a supreme artist in depicting the beauties of the countryside and the wondrous works of nature, a poet with the true lyrical cry, who sang tenderly from the heart of the sweet passion of love, a poet whose appeal was universal, whose influence was world-wide, whose fame had travelled to every corner of the earth.

He was the true poet of the people, with that simple sincerity, that natural directness, that live and passionate enthusiasm which storm and carry the ramparts built round even the most strongly entrenched and selfish heart. His message had been made available by a sort of international currency of thought, for all the world; and if it could find entry to the heart and soul of man, it would accomplish more for universal peace and happiness than all the self-seeking conventions and agreements of all the politicians and Parliaments of Europe. "God knows," he says in one of his letters, "I am no saint; I have a whole host of follies and sins to answer for; but if I could, and I believe I do it as far as I can, I would wipe away all tears from all eyes." How many of us to-day could truthfully say that such was the guiding motto of their daily life? Coming as he (the speaker) did from a great industrial city, which more than most others had been smitten by the calamity of unemployment, he often thought of the remark of Gilbert Burns, who said of the Poet, My brother used to remark to me, that he could not well conceive a more mortifying picture of human life than a man seeking work." In casting about in his mind how this sentiment might be brought forward, the elegy "Man was made to Mourn," was composed. He only wished that it could be made compulsory for the moving words of that truly inspired poem, to be learned by heart by every financier, every employer, and every politician at the present day, Robert Burns was proud of Scotland/ and had made Scotland proud of him. His life's ambition was to be the Scottish Bard, and as such, he had made the whole world his dominion. He was king alike of the humble fire-side, the scholar's circle, the wealthy hall, and the princely palace. He believed in his country he never doubted its destiny, he refused to be tempted to abandon his rich and glorious native tongue, despite the appeals of scholars and powerful friends. To that beautiful tongue, he gave its fullest development and most perfect expression/ and he left a golden treasury of poetry as a perfect pattern and an inexhaustible source of inspiration, which should fire the new Scottish literary renaissance with an ardent fervour, and carry it to the greatest heights of achievement. Dr Hunter, in moving the toast 'Our Guest' said he remembered taking Bernard Shaw round the sights of Dumfries some years ago,

and when he asked Shaw if he wanted to see the house where Burns died, Mr. Shaw said: "No, any house would kill a poet," and when asked if he wanted to go to the Mausoleum, Shaw answered that Burns' true memorial was his works. To a certain extent that was true. Burns' works were enshrined in the hearts of the people of Scotland, but they in Dumfries had a certain interest in the stone and lime. They saw the old Places he was wont to frequent. They were next door to the room in which Burns used to sit, and no speaker could catch the spirit of Burns better than in the Burns Howff Club, because there they saw around them, the lineal successors of men who were Burns' friends.