

SIR HENRY FILDES MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT 1935

I cannot convey to you how highly I appreciate the honour of being a guest of your historic club and also being entrusted with the duty of proposing "The Immortal Memory:" There have been many distinguished speakers who have honoured the memory of Burns, but I do not think it would be amiss if I mentioned the name of one, Dr. Hunter. Dr. Hunter was probably better known South of Carlisle than he was in this country, as he addressed innumerable gatherings south of the Border. "Historic" is indeed the accurate word to employ with regard to this institution, which, for forty-eight years, has, in dark days and bright, met annually to dwell upon the virtues and enquire into the mysteries which are associated with the life of the unique Robert Burns. It is, I think, an unprecedented feature in the annals of this band of friends, that an Englishman should be standing at this time performing the distinctive duty allotted to me. Perhaps a parallel could be drawn with the Scottish representation at Stratford-on-Avon on the occasion of the Shakespearean celebrations on the re-building of the Memorial Theatre. I do not know if all of you have realised the fact that, excepting Christmas, there is no birthday in the world's history which is celebrated in so many different climes and countries, under such varying conditions, with such loyalty, affection, and fierce fervour, as has been done in the case of the Scottish national poet. It is in a singular degree dramatic that, on this night and in the succeeding hours as the world rolls round, the torch fired with admiration and affection will be passed on from hand to hand and the place encircled by enthusiastic and fervent gatherings of Scotsmen, reviewing and reviving memories of the life of a Scottish ploughman. A very distinguished Scotsman has stated that a great man lays upon posterity the duty of understanding him. It is a difficult task when the man in question falls under no accepted category, and it is hardest of all when one who sets classification at defiance seems to unite in himself every contrary, and dominates his generation like some portent of nature, a mystery to his admirers and an enigma to his successors. "For every lowly thing, for all downtrodden, unhappy folk, Burns was full of pity; and that pity has immortal expression in many of his poems, while there is also a wistfulness about much that he wrote which goes straight to our hearts."

Burns is the best loved of Scotland's national heroes. His supreme candour, his absolute honesty, the frankness with which he spoke of his sometimes uncontrolled passions and his occasional excesses, and the way in which he broadcast his love affairs to the world in his poems, have silenced the critics and made succeeding generations marvel at his freedom from hypocrisy and subterfuge with regard to himself and his conduct. Somebody will one day write a volume on the tragedies and sufferings of the wives of men of genius. A man with Burns' kindness of heart and supremely sensitive nature would never willingly have inflicted pain on those he loved best. His genius demanded that he should live his life at the white-heat of consuming passion. The companionship of his fellow men and their experiences added fuel to the brightness of his fiery genius. The experience he gained in his roistering expeditions has been made the vehicle through which advice and warning has been conveyed to succeeding generations. The wife of a genius, to be successful, must be in her turn a genius in the management of man. It has been well said that Burns wrote in language that owed little to the study of other poets. He sang of Scotland, home and beauty. He wrote of Scottish people, their roisterings, their superstitions, their follies and their vices. The outstanding fact that applies to Burns, as to the Scots peasantry generally, is that the educational facilities of the days in which he lived were immeasurably greater than those obtaining in any other part of the United Kingdom. It is eloquent of the character and aspirations of his father that, though dwelling in a two-roomed clay

cottage, he was instrumental in inducing certain of his neighbours to engage a young teacher, William Murdoch, of Ayr, to educate and impart not only a knowledge of grammar, but to introduce his pupils to a world of literature and art. Though engaged as a ploughman in strenuously surmounting the difficulties which surrounded and encumbered the life of a small farmer, he acquired a useful knowledge of the French tongue. The formation of the Bachelors' Club in Tarbolton in 1780. is another evidence of that striving for knowledge, that desire of association with those who could criticise his ideas and polish, by contact, even friction, the gems of thought and inspiration which erupted from his active mind. It is impossible to estimate how far the influence of the songs and weird tales of the superstitious old maid of his mother caused the latent seeds of poetry to fructify in his being. In his fourteenth year he did the work of a grown ploughman on his father's unsuccessful farm of Mount Oliphant. He affirmed at the time that his life then combined "the gloom of a hermit with the toil of a galley slave." Yet, although he was remunerated on the scale of an ordinary farm labourer, it is remarkable and inexpressibly praiseworthy that Burns did not live beyond his income, which was £7 per annum, or less than three shillings per week. The bare fact that Robert Burns was born on the 25th of January, 1759, was married in 1788, and died in his thirty-eighth year, 1796, need not be repeated to a gathering where every episode and movement associated with the life of Burns has been faithfully chronicled where every written or spoken word of this remarkable genius has been treasured, correlated, analysed, in order that an illuminating and informative interpretation may yield the full fragrance and flavour of the Poet's inspiration. It may well be that, as an Englishman, I should endeavor to look into the conditions obtaining in Scotland between the years 1759 and 1796, of Burns' sojourn on this planet. Let us try to understand how the thoughts and words of a ploughman, largely self-educated, have dominated the thoughts and minds of educated and meditative citizens of the world of all classes and climes. The total population of Scotland in Burns' day was just over one and a half million. It is stated authoritatively that there were at least 200,000 souls whose life was of a nomadic character, and had no settled homes; who moved promiscuously from district to district, whose deaths were not recorded, and the cause or reason for whose demise was in no way inquired into; recognising no law any life lost in a brawl was quickly concealed by the staunch, virile tussock or the ever growing heather. The home life of the labouring class was primitive to the last degree. Newspapers were almost unknown, Dumfries being one of the few provincial towns to have a newspaper circulated in those days, a trifling and comparatively indifferent sheet offered to the public at seven pence per copy, and knowledge of the outside world was largely provided by the reiteration of experience gained through barter or in the more perilous duties of soldiers of fortune or the manning of a privateer.

For the peasant no vote or franchise of any kind was available to interpret or influence his destiny. "Their's not to reason why, their's but to do or die," are words that may fitly describe the conditions under which the poorer peasantry existed in those far-off days. Those were days before Macadam, who made such a great contribution to the civilised world with his roads. They were the days of the infrequent stage coach, where the chatting with the driver or the guard brought gossip which circulated round the area. There were no rail-ways, no telegraphs, no lighting to speak of, no big cities. Glasgow and other manufacturing centres had not been thought of. And yet in times like these, wandering in the quiet of the night or riding to his home further out from Dumfries, in that quiet time there was developed in the soul of Burns a message that has had enormous influence on the state of affairs as we know them to-day. He

preached a gospel at the time unknown which, with the advance of time, has had accepted credence and which may turn out to be the salvation of civilisation. A strong aristocracy, supported and maintained with fervent ardour. and fierce tenacity, suppressed any gleams of individuality and isolated action that might have shown themselves amongst the struggling poor. Yet it is from such unpromising soil that Burns produced words which staggered humanity with their virility and the oracular fashion in which he declared his belief in the rights of man. Try to imagine the effect of this declaration upon the drab life of the average peasant:—

"The rank is but the guinea stamp:

A man's a man for a' that."

We can measure the soul—searching illumination of these words:—

"O wad some po'er the gittie gi'e us

To see ourselves as ithers see us."

Or:—

"If I'm designed yon lordling's slave

By nature' laws designed,

Why was an independent wish planted in my mind?

If not, why am I subject to his cruelty or scorn.

Or why has man the will and power to make his fellows mourn?"

Who can tell the heart—searchings, the self—examination, the discovery of and the determination to eliminate much that was mean, discreditable and paltry in the lives of those who lived in his day. Who shall know the clean—sing influence that comes and has come from "The Cotter's Saturday Night" in the century and a half that has elapsed since his death?

The miracle of his poesy needs no words of mine to bring it keenly to your memory this night. The facts are revealed with blinding clarity that, as an inspired patriot, as a proclaimer of the gospel of the brotherhood of man, his unceasing warfare on cant, hypocrisy and humbug, show him as one of the greatest preachers of all time. The very concentration of his being, the calorific intensity of his amours and his roisterings, are part and parcel of the nature which have made clear to the world his priceless gifts as a teacher and prophet, as a poet and songster, and are inseparable from his personal and literary achievements. It is a proud thing, standing here as an Englishman, to remember that the first edition of Burns' works to be published after his death was the result of careful garnering by a Liverpool man. It is a comforting thought that from the proceeds of that work there were acquired the necessary funds to relieve the immediate needs of the Poet's widow and his family. We are here to—night, within walls where the voice of the Poet has often been heard in song, laughter and serious discourse.

Consider the miracle of it all! We are celebrating the birth—day of a ploughman who had every conceivable handicap and disadvantage placed, like a cruel destiny, in his path, and as the fleeting hours pass and this day is gathered to the 48 that have been celebrated in this room and the lights are dimmed, and we to our couches adjourn, the torch of remembrance, of appreciation and gratitude will follow the track of the sun the world about, and Scotsmen and others will take up the song of praise and thankfulness that Almighty God, through his poor and lowly ploughman, revealed the possibilities and the heights to which the poorest of his creation might aspire. In that brotherhood amongst men, the sympathy and kindness to the Almighty's creation in the animal

world, the revelation of the beauty and matchless purity of the vegetable and floral life, has been revealed in unequalled eloquence and imperishable language. Your forebears made great sacrifices. No race has developed such frugality, such integrity, or borne suffering with dourness and silence. With what result? The settling in all corners of the world of those very qualities, plus the vision of your national poet, has made a greater contribution to the stability and unbreak-ability of the British Empire, than probably any other feature. A great English hymn-writer uttered these sanctified words:—

"The sun which bids us rest is waking
Our brethren 'neath the western sky.
And hour by hour fresh lips are making
His (Thy) wondrous doings heard on high."

I ask you to be upstanding, full of gratitude that the gospel of freedom and manhood is coming into its very own, and that the seed that this ploughman sowed years ago is fructifying and revealing itself in these days, not only in our national life, but wherever civilisation spreads and wherever a British subject is found. In silence, remembering the sadness of his life, remembering his sufferings and what must have been the heart-breaking experience of his genius, I ask you to drink to "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns."