Captain W CUTHBERTSON IMMORTAL MEMORY 1941

Captain Cuthbertson, in proposing "The Immortal Memory" said that it was peculiarly fitting at this time, when a barbarian fool was making a dead set against those tangible memorials that embodied the richness of our heritage, and the glory of our recent achievements, that we should make all the greater effort to preserve un¬polluted, the stream of culture which flowed from the great minds of the past. It was possible to reduce to rubble and dust the sacred buildings, ancient monuments, and works of strength and art and beauty, or the homes whose very wails enshrined many tender associations. It was Possible, in an orgy of destruction, if it were successful, to leave a nation with nothing, or at all events, with little but the ground under its feet and the sky over its head. Yet even so, there were treasures remaining of which no man and

no power could rob us. There were the spiritual virtues which humanised our outlook, and . which we felt instinctively to be true to the pattern of life. We had need of such a man as Burns at this hour. He was a type of man that was never out or date. In a crisis in which the universal scheme of things was in grave danger, he preserved the finer feelings which the circumstances of the time combined to undermine. Burns lived in a century when there was a great wave of unrest throughout the world. It was an age, not altogether unlike our own. It was an age of questioning. Everywhere people were seeking for the basis of a wide and beneficent freedom. Institutions which had served their day, were being critically examined. Philosophers reasoned that progress was being hampered by arbitrary restrictions. The American colonies had revolted because their free de¬velopment was denied them. They were neither rebels nor discontented. They were driven to desperation by the obstinacy of the British Government. They were at pains to emphasise their loyalty to the motherland, but they refused to confuse loyalty with subservience.

On the Continent, the revolution from arbitrary power was more extreme, but on the other hand, it was provoked by a tyranny which was utterly ruthless and selfish. The French humanitarians, as they were called, pushed the doctrine of freedom to fantastic lengths. The great French writer, Rousseau, the author of "The Social Contract," was so obsessed with the implications of his theory, that he seriously came to believe that man was, by nature, altogether good, and that all he required to be perfect, as freedom to follow his own inclinations. Of course, they all knew that there was much in man that was good, but it was a delusion to believe that he could reach a state of perfection by license, terrorism and anarchy. He was, for instance, a member of society, and his membership involved recognition of the rights of others as well as the assertion that he had rights of his own. Probably no man in the history of the world, in a comparable - position had had greater freedom to exercise his unfettered will than the present ruler of the German Empire, and certainly no man had ever more disgraced the name of man. Revolution was inevitable in France in the eighteenth century, unless the constitution and the monarchy were drastically reformed, to bring them into harmony with the opinions and wishes of the subjects. Burns was a young man while much of this was going on, with an alert inquisitive mind, and a humane outlook. He occupied but a small place in his own district and even less in life of the Scottish nation. He had little chance of material improvement. He worked long and weary hours in order to extract a bare subsistence from

an intractable soil, but he was inclined to think that Burns exaggerated his condition when he compared it to the cheerless gloom of a hermit and the unceasing toil of a galley slave. In the prevailing conditions which then existed, many a mind and spirit,

destined for nobler things were crushed by poverty and also by disease, which was almost as widespread as
poverty itself. It was a distressing reflection to think what an incalculable moral and material wealth the world during its long, and sometimes melancholy, career had lost by its failure to make the best of its human material, or even give that human material a fair chance. Burns strenuously declined to be a mere clodhopper, satisfied with the gratification of his bodily needs. He was conscious that although the world might not recognise him, he had powers within himself which would compel attention. He was sociable yet studious, emotional yet reflective, and as the great pageant of life passed, he felt that it was not sufficient for him to be a mere spectator. It was no ignoble egotism that determined him to take part in the procession-itself. Many men of power and achievement and promise had marched in the forefront of their day and had vanished from the memory of succeeding generations. Burns, on the contrary, entered obscurely at the rear, and moved on to—day with a deathless march. The world saddened as well as amused him. He held strong opinions on social questions, and he was caught up in a revolutionary fervour as the echoes of the tumult from across the channel reached his ears, challenged his feelings and agitated his mind. Very soon he became disillusioned, especially when Napoleon began to use the French Empire as an instrument of conquest.

A man who could look upon the "modest, crimson—tipped flower" and the "Cowrin' tim'rous beastie" as fellow creatures was sure to recoil, as in fact he did recoil, from the bloodshed, riot and destruction which marked the course of the French Revolution. He had a nobler ambition. It was to teach men of whatever race or clime to be friends, and when this was achieved, there would be no need for them to cut one another's throats. "hat ails you, brother man?" he seemed to say, "you are sad and depressed, sullen and savage. Why not let us all be friends, and then we can be happy together?" This was his great ideal for the brotherhood of man, which was one of the absorbing passions of his life. It was a strange commentary on the violence of to—day that it was a great German poet, Goethe, perhaps the most revered figure in German literature, who was one of the
first to draw attention to the new star that had arisen in the literary firmament, and more than a hundred years later, one of the most sympathetic and penetrating biographies of the poet was written by another German, Professor Hans Hecht, whom some of them no doubt met, or at all events heard, at the Burns Federation Conference at Newcastle—on—Tyne a few years ago. He did not know what had happened to Burns in Germany to—day, but it was an undoubted fact that everything he stood for was cast on the waste heap by the naked brutality of the Nazi creed. Burns stood near the centre of life, Hitler had deliberately placed himself outside all moral sanctities and loyalties. Burns appealed for free thought,

free speech, and above all for a mind devoted to the general good. Hitler stood for a system which, in agony, woe, and lust, was rotting to its doom. Touching on the lyrical qualities of the poetry of Burns in conclusion, he said that there was a grandeur in his poetry, not
the aloof and solitary grandeur of a mountain peak, like the organ voice of Milton, or even the 'wi1d—wood notes of Shakespeare, but the grandeur of the little and intimate things
and the relations of life consecrated in the mind, to the purposes of the Creator of the universe.