MR. GEORGE G. GRAHAM, J. P.. - IMMORTAL MEMORY, 1942.

Mr George G. Graham, J. P., secretary of the Scottish Football Association, was the principal guest at the annual dinner of Dumfries Burns Howff Club, which was held in the Globe Inn on Monday evening, 25th January, 1942. Mt. Graham propose toast of "The Immortal Memory" in an excellent speech, in which he dealt at length with opinions expressed by the Brains Trust in recent broadcasts, conveying the impression that the poems of Burns could have been written by an un-educated man, and showed that the Bard was a man of education and culture, which revealed itself in his works.

Mt. Graham, in submitting the toast of "The Immortal Memory," said:- Modern science has conferred many benefits on mankind within the memory of all present here and I think there will be a general agreement that for the ordinary people, or the common people as Burns would have called them, the greatest boon has been the coming of wireless, and as it has become the accepted practice for Burns speakers to endeavour to associate their toast with a topical subject, I propose to take as the main theme of this toast two questions I heard recently on the air in the programme called the "Brains Trust," a collection of intellectual people to whom one may address any sort of question, provided one is prepared to accept any sort of answer, or perhaps no answer at all. A few weeks ago a question was put, "Why do people write?" It seemed rather an innocuous question, but it found the Brains Trust somewhat divided. One member bluntly expressed the view that people wrote because they had need to do so for financial reasons. Another, looked upon as the man
learned of the lot, himself an author, gave his view, founded on his own experience, that he wrote books, not for money, but because he felt that he could write something which, if not now, might in the future be of advantage to those who cared to read his books. Further than that the Brains Trust did not get. I did not associate that question with our National Bard until the Brains Trust held a Scottish session about a fortnight ago and deal with a question as to "How it came about that an uneducated person like Burns could have produced such beautiful poems?" and then I recalled the previous question, "Why do people write?" and the association of the two in relation to Burns flashed across my mind. "Why do people write?"; the "uneducated Burns"; but I am afraid the views of the Brains Trust, as submitted in their replies to these questions, do not apply to Burns at all, because it did not appear to have occurred to any one of them that a person might write for any reason other than money or for literary fame. Yet we may be sure that neither of these reasons or considerations ever crossed Burns' mind. He wrote because he was impelled to write. When he commenced rhyming he simply did so for his own amusement and enjoyment, and never for a moment did he think that one day he would publish his poems, never for a moment did he dream that one day his verses would be looked upon as masterpieces of Scottish poetry, never for a moment did he imagine that his efforts would be the salvation of the Scottish dialect and tongue and the means of preserving our language from extinction. Yet, as it happened, circumstances and the solicitations of friends compelled him to publish his works, and although he did not appreciate the fact when he started his writings, it might easily be thought that he did write because he could put down something from which others might benefit in the generations to come. We know that Burns commenced his musings at a very early age, but he had lived at least half his life before he ever thought seriously about it. In his commonplace book he tells us that he never really thought of becoming a poet until he was heartily in love, and then he says, "Poems and song were in a manner the spontaneous language of my heart." Burns wrote his poetry and songs because he had a natural gift for so doing, and it

simply had to find expression, so that his works must be regarded as the natural expression of his poetic genius. When he was inspired to compose poetry, poet came gushing from the well of his human affections. He tells us of the inspiration he found in communing with nature until his themes and music ran in harmony; how, humming to the air the verses he had made, he would retire to his fireside and there call forth his own critical strictures of his effusions, and then, when his ideas had acquired proper form, he had nothing more to do but pour out his poetry like a stream irrigating a meadow or refreshing drooping flowers or fading verdure. I think Burns has proved the Brains Trust wrong in their views on writing, because he stands as one who wrote neither for money nor for intellectual merit, and he also provides an alternative greater than either of these reasons which occurred to our pundits of the air — an alternative which makes a writer a bigger and a greater man than those who write for wealth or fame. But what are we to think of their answers to the second query? It must be obvious to any real student of Burns who was listening, that neither the questioner nor the Brains Trust knew very much about the subject at all. I thought we had long since agreed that the term "uneducated" could simply not be applied to Burns, but I fear that the use of this term by the questioner revealed either his belief or an appalling ignorance. But what of the Brains Trust, not one of whom seemed to realise that the answer was very much like the proper answer to the other question and could have been given in one word — genius. There was no need for them to soar into high—faluting explanations to find an answer, and if they had been as well versed in the subject as they presumed to be, they could surely have animadverted very strongly on the terms of the question, and put the questioner right at once. Their omission to do so leaves one the assumption that they were in agreement that the poet was uneducated. But we know that such is far from the truth, because Burns was an educated man, and well—educated, too, judged by the standards of his day. One must, of course, differentiate between education and schooling, because Burns' schooldays were certainly very short, something between two and three years altogether. That does not necessarily mean, or even imply, that he was uneducated. As you know, the school period — compulsory attendance — is between nine and ten years, but it does not mean that all pupils are educated when they leave school. Indeed, if we take the percentage of pupils who qualify for the higher leaving certificate as an indication of the number who might be considered to have been educated, it leaves a great majority of the pupils without any real claim to learning, and I am quite certain that there are many critics of our present—day educational system who would quite sincerely claim that three years of schooling such as Burns had, with the three R's forming the basis of education, was far more beneficial to the students than the nine or ten they get to—day with a very complicated and even confusing curriculum they are compelled to undertake. Burns' education did not begin and end with the days he spent in the schoolroom. Actually it had commenced before he ever saw John Murdoch, since we have it on record that Murdoch, on taking up his duties as mentor at the little school at Alloway, found that both Gilbert and Robert Burns had already been grounded in English. This, of course, was a tribute to Burns' father, who, with a real Scottish outlook, desired to see his children in a better state than he himself was, so he had taken upon himself the earliest education of his family. Betty Davidson, too, played a part in Burns' early education with her collection of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts and witches, and like subjects, and she never wearied in interesting the precocious boy in these things, and gave to his mind an imagination which helped him materially as part of his education. But apart from his actual scholastic studies, Burns really found his own education. He was always a reader of real literature. He tells us in

his biography, that the first two books he ever read were the "Life of Hannibal," which was lent him by Murdoch, and the "History of Sir William Wallace," which he borrowed from the village blacksmith. These were not books to be read and discarded; they were for serious study and learning, and they might be taken as typical of the books Burns studied and inwardly digested. When he was fourteen years of age, Burns, again under the tuition of Murdoch, commenced a study of French, and after a very short period, so industrially did he apply himself to the study, that Murdoch records that he began to read the "Adventures of Telemachus" in Fenelon's own words. Burns also had a command of Latin, which we find him using occasionally in his poems. How then, is it conceivable that anyone in this enlightened age should seek a reason for the great works written by Burns, and how can such intellectual experts, casting their great knowledge — they hope — to the entire listening world, say that learning, or its other term, education, was not necessary to produce the poems Burns produced? I really suspect that not one of the Brains Trust has ever read Burns from cover to cover. Like many more, they may know that he wrote "A man's a man for a' that," but of his deeper philosophy they are almost ignorant. Uneducated forsooth: I wonder how many of the Brains Trust have heard of Burns' song, “My father was a farmer." Burns himself felt that this song: "was a wild rhapsody, miserably deficient in versification, but having sentiments of the genuine feelings of his heart." Never mind versification; you have studied these sentiments and then formed an opinion of the merits and worth of the writer. It probably was composed after the year 1781, following the collapse of the flax—dressing venture at Irvine, which added much of the poet's stock of experience of human life and human folly. Burns' early years must have been years of deep and intensive study, and it must be remembered too that on his father's death he had to leave his teacher and do his share of work on the farm, and, knowing as we do the long hours which farm workers were required to put in, we cannot help but marvel at the industry with which he must have applied himself in the very little leisure time he had in order to educate himself to the high standard he reached. Meagre though his income was, he commenced to build up a library of his awn, and it is typical of the man that the books he secured were such as to advance his knowledge and extend his vocabulary and learning. Indeed, until he was eighteen years of age, Burns must have had little time for anything but work and education, and we must admire the downright ruthlessness of his application to his books and study, a demonstration of will-power for which few give him credit. Although he wrote later, in one of his epistles to Lapraik:-
‘Gie me a spark o nature's fire,
That's a' the learning I desire."
there is ample evidence to show that if he really held these views when he was twenty-six years of age, it must have beer because he felt by that time he was master of himself so far as education was concerned, and was critical of the advantages and doubtful of the results of college education, as witness his remark,

"They gang in stirks and come out asses."

I think the only member of the Brains Trust who got close to Burns, was the one who suggested that the greatness of his works was due to his close understanding of the common people and his great human sympathy, although the possession of that great quality alone could not have enabled him to convey it so beautifully and aptly, if he had not also had the education to do it. That great human sympathy was indeed one of the outstanding characteristics of Burns, but only one of many attributes displayed in his writings. When many of the present-day dogmas and "isms" had not been thought of, Burns was preaching a doctrine of democracy, a plea for equal rights as man to man, irrespective of wealth or power or position. That was just another phase of his great

human sympathy, indeed it is not too much to say that Burns' human sympathy was to a great extent his religion, and I do think that is a religion akin in many respects to that which we profess to-day, a religion of purity and long-suffering, of love and promise; a religion which sympathises with all general excellences, beauty and intellectual power, these qualities of our human faith which combine in teaching us to pity the fallen, to be charitable to the erring. Burns preached his religion in his awn simple language:-
"The heart benevolent and kind
The most resembles God."
That was the religion of Burns, and,though it may differ some-what from that preached in the Sermon on the Mount, it is founded on love in equal measure, a love which sprang not from lips, but from the heart of the poet. Self-educated perhaps - and we glory with him in his achievement - but uneducated, never. We might well believe that with a University education, Burns would have lacked the experience of life which gave rise to many of his best works. Would a poet of unbending principle and stern moral character have been eternal as Burns undoubtedly is. Would there have been the great variety in his poems and songs if he had not had the experience which fell to him? When we reflect on these things, we must always realise that genius must be taken as it is. We cannot alter it even if we would. We cannot form the lives of such men; they are formed by nature, and we must accept them as they are, and, when all is said and done, I am sure we would not have our Burns any different, despite all the criticisms which have been levelled at him throughout
the ages, sometimes by critics who made up for their scarcity of real facts by a fecundi of invention or opinions. Of such is the Brains Trust who failed miserably to recognise his genius or give him credit for his education.
The appeal of Burns to us is not, of course, through his education or his learning. We are content to honour him for the great legacy of song and story he has left us, and which will live long after the Brains Trust has been dissolved and forgotten. It is, above all, the recognition of a really great son of Scotland, who had great patriotism for his native country, who had a heart which could rise above misfortune and a mind which could grasp and portray the beauties of life and nature, the like of which had not been known before his day, and has not been equalled since. Nothing seems to have escaped his observant vision, judging by the manner in which he wrote and discoursed on all subjects with equal facility. But shining through all his works is one outstanding faculty he had — the faculty of coining a phrase to meet any circumstances he had in mind. He could portray things with words in the same manner as an eminent painter would and could transmit his ideas to canvas. Burns had that faculty in a very high degree; indeed to such an extent that it must have been inherent and not acquired by education, as we find it in so many of his works of different character.
Mr. Graham quoted extensively from Burns' works, and particularly from "Tam o' Shanter," to show his capacity of the poet to paint a brilliant word picture, and said that Sir Walter Scott, in referring to this particular form of Burns' genius, quoted "Ae Fond Kiss" as containing in its few lines "the essence of a thousand love tales." Another instance was in his verses "To a Louse":—
"0 wad some po'er the giftie gie us
To see oorsels as ithers see us."

If some people in this world to—day, the likes of whom we all know, could see themselves as others see them, and if they had the capacity to consider the rights and opinions of others, history might take a different shape and this world would undoubtedly be a better place in which the peoples of all countries, races, and creeds

might live in peace and happiness and plenty. So to—night, we are gathered to renew our pledges of love and esteem for the humble poet born 183 years ago in that auld clay biggin at Alloway, and in the midst of our praise and thanksgiving, I am sure we must all feel regret that Burns was not appreciated in his own day, as he is now, although we may console ourselves with the knowledge that it is ever thus, even to—day. But if his own generation was remiss, generations which came after him: have realised his worth and genius. I give you the toast of "The Immortal Memory" in these words:—

"Quietly he passed,
The great surrender made,
Into the light
That nevermore shall fade."