

Colonel Hugh Somerville Immortal Memory 1943.

Colonel Somerville in proposing the toast of "The Immortal Memory", said:— I never envy Alloway its but and ben where Burns first saw the light, nor Mossgiel nor Ellisland their fields and their steadings. Here in Dumfries lies all that is mortal of our poet, here his last dwelling place on earth, and here the banks of Nith and Cluden, where he loved to wander, and whose beauties inspired some of his loveliest poetry. Is not that a great heritage and one of which we should be proud. Surely we in Dumfries, whose streets he trod, must ever be reminded of the great figure we are gathered to honour, and to whose genius we seek to pay tribute, as generations of Scotsmen have done before us, and as we believe further generations will continue to do long after we, like Burns, have passed on. But you and I will be forgotten — Burns will remain immortal. And now for a few minutes I should like to guide your thoughts to Burns, the man, and Burns, the poet. It is the case that you can dissociate the work of some poets from their lives, but in the case of those of the highest rank you cannot do so. The poet and the man are one and indivisible. And so in the case of Burns, to try to separate the man from his poetry is to attempt the impossible. From the hardships of his early upbringing, the mischances of his later manhood, the joys and the sorrows of his life, springs not only Burns, the poet, but Burns, the man-- the poet with his message of humanity, of love for the beast of the field and the flowers by the wayside, of freedom for all irrespective of political creed — the man with his shortcomings. Burns lived in a hard age, a time of poverty and depression, when the classes dominated the masses and corruption was rife. Yet he never failed to demand the rights of the oppressed and the poverty—stricken, the weak and the indigent. It has become the custom of certain speakers to attempt a sort of analysis of his political views. Some have said that he never would have supported a totalitarian state — be it Fascist or Communist. Others have allied him with the respective views of the existing political parties in this country. But I would suggest that you cannot link Burns with a political —ism. He is far too great for that — his views transcend the petti—fogging intrigues of politicians. They are universal truths. Take "A man's a man": there is no narrow nationalism here, no adherence to a political group. He states a downright truth applicable the world over — a truth which he held could not be denied. No, Burns has given the world its greatest internationale —

in song he has given more of the true spirit of liberty than any other man, irrespective of country, and in "Auld Lang Syne" he has given us as Scots a national song of memory and remembrance which bids fair to become the greatest song of yearning that has ever been written. Let the politicians leave Burns alone — leave him to us, who as common folk understand him as he understood us, conscious of and desires, our miseries and our tears, our hatreds and our loves, frail and weak, the good and the bad side in us — common clay — yet us, as he was, capable of some great achievement, some great act of which the world in most cases is never aware. And how has it come about that one of ourselves should have so gained fame as a poet and as a man that this week the world over, his birth is celebrated? He is no casual local poet writing odd verses for the press. His fame has gone far beyond the confines of Scotland, and he has gained a place among the immortals of world literature. Certainly Scotland's debt is the greater, for he joins us all together irrespective of class, in a way no other poet has done — Shakespeare, Homer, Virgil. And yet he came out of a Scottish peasant's cottage, the like of which in better case exist to the present day in the lowlands of Scotland. Of formal schooling, as you and I know it, he had little; yet, however hardly come by, through his own efforts, he was as well educated as any man in the Scotland of his day, and better than most. Reared in

comparative poverty, put far too early to work, doing a man's job while yet a boy, he succeeded in catching up the true spirit of song, and gave to Scotland and to the world those gems of lyric poetry which in their class are unsurpassed in the literature of the world, while, on the other hand, in satire and epistle and descriptive verse, he reached a level almost as high. Yet throughout he remained what he was — a son of Scot-tish soil, simple and unaffected. No matter where he was — in the parlour of a country inn, the snuggerly of some bonnet laird, the drawing-room of some lady of fashion — he still remained frank and unspoiled, maintaining his independence of thought and action when he might have gained so much had he but pandered to the powers that then controlled the destinies of such men as himself. He refused, and we think the more of him for it. Have you ever tried to picture Burns as he was in his Dumfries days, when behind him were the failures of Mossgiel and Ellisland, the hopes of a new career in the Indies, and that wonderful year in Edinburgh when Scottish society was at his feet and yet did so little for him? I feel sure any one of you here to-night giving his imagination free rein could conjure up the picture — the tall, stooped figure striding down the street, one moment with a glint of recognition in the eye as he notices some passing acquaintance, next moment the placid look of benevolence as some incident catches his attention — children playing in the road, may be, or a mother gathering her children from play; or another scene — among his companions, enlivening the conversation, turning quick shafts of wit against an argumentative neighbour, or flashing words of scorn as he pillories hypocrisy and sham, no matter whether in manse or mansion. All of us can build up a picture of Burns, whether behind the plough, on gauger's nag, in someone's house or by his own fireside. And in every circumstance Burns remains the man he was — true, loyal to his class but above them all. I have already suggested to you what I consider to be the supreme message of Burns — man's universal brotherhood. This note pervades poem after poem. It is no casual thought, but an ever re-iterated truth, and from its frequency we can gather how much in revolt he was against the cruelties, the shams and hypocrisies of his day, which, alas, you and I know only too well, have persisted too long even unto our own time — hypocrisy in thought, action, religion. All these, Burns lashes with scorn and with fierce invective, sparing no one, individual or sect, saint or sinner. And yet to the man who unwittingly offends he is kindly and tolerant, human and understanding. He was no Pharisee, no whited sepulchre, thanking God he was not as other men. He would help the helpless, succour an erring brother repentant of his shortcomings, but the Holy Willies of his day he detested and scorned with all the vigour of his being. He had suffered much himself from misunderstanding. It never could be laid at his door that he misunderstood others. And don't let us over-emphasise what have come to be regarded as Burns' shortcomings. He was a victim of his time, and if he is no exception to the others of his time, why worry? Nor must we exaggerate his moral lapses. Others have been worse and less has been known of them. And it is well to keep in mind that there is a poetic license which allows a man to exaggerate his adventures in love and his escapades in wine. Burns was no moral degenerate.

And then his second great message — his message of man's relationship to life as represented in the beauties of nature and life other than human — the birds of the field, the woods and the hedgerow., the shepherd's dog and the old cow, the timid field mouse, the wild-flowers by the roadside, all represent to him a common impulse, creating, controlling, and directing our destinies and our lives, and demanding from all life kindness and understanding. With that, too, there goes hand in hand his love of nature as seen in the drumly burn, the cushat's cooing, the sigh of the woods, and the

waving of the flowers. Man, beast, flowers are the product and the care of one great Creative Force. Can there be anything gross in a man whose outlook is that of Burns? I cannot believe it. And yet how much a man like Burns suffered in his lifetime, and how much his memory has suffered since. Misunderstood and maligned, he fought in his lifetime what was a losing battle — and yet one bow to constituted authority and he would have gained much. Ultimately racked with pain, with debts accumulated around him, looked at askance in the town where it should have been an honour to help him, he collapsed under the intolerable strain of illness, and finally passed away, leaving behind him a memory which will hold Scotsmen together so long as nationality persists, and when that goes he will come still further into his own as the greatest figure of internationalism the world has ever seen outside religion. Then we shall see Burns in all his magnificence — the world apostle of freedom, fraternity and faith. It is to the hearing, of that day and to Burns that I shall ask you to drink.