

Mr J MacINTTRE, MAUCLINE. — IMMORTAL MEMORY 1945

Mr. J. MacIntyre, Mauchline, treasurer of the Burns Federation, proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the annual dinner of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club, held in the Globe Inn on Thursday evening, 25th January, 1945.

MacIntyre spoke of the national bard as the poet of man who was, of all things, human, and whose voice sounding in everything he wrote, was a man's voice. The greatest contribution that Burns made to his kind as the poet of man was to give to man as man a new dignity, and make the common men and women among whom he lived conscious of their own inherent greatness.

Mr. MacIntyre, in submitting the toast of "The Immortal Memory" said:— Whatever else may be said about Robert Burns this much must be said — he was human. The voice that sounds through all that he ever wrote is a man's voice. His poetry is the outpouring of a man's heart. Old wives, whether they are male or female, will never appreciate him. His heart, if you will not misunderstand me, was the heart of a noble barbarian. All the wild impulses of man were there ungoverned by convention, all the generous impulses of man unchecked by prudence, and it is because the primitive impulses of the heart are in everyone of us, that our hearts vibrate in sympathy with the sentiments and feelings of Burns, and that men gather year after year to pay their tribute to his memory. It was not Burns' ambition to gain the ear of the learned when he published that little book of his in Kilmarnock. He had the simple ambition (though he was far from unconscious of his own gifts) that he might utter that language of his own heart that other hearts may beat in time with his. Burns was the poet of man, not only because of the appeal that he is able to make to men across the barriers of space and time, but because man was the subject of all his work; his interest in human nature was the consuming passion of his life. Some call Burns the poet of nature, and true it is that some of his descriptions can rank among the finest nature poetry of our language, but Burns never had any interest merely in describing natural scenes, he always used nature as a setting for the expression of his own feelings or as a background for human figures. Wordsworth can make a whole picture by describing some scene of natural beauty until it stands before the mind's eye as an elaborate landscape picture, but Burns never painted a picture in words without a human figure standing prominently in the foreground, himself or another. Can you think of a single poem or song of our National Bard in which there is not a person and a strong human interest? You find the same trait in "Ye Banks and Braes" and in "The Lass o' Ballochmyle." "The Birks of Aberfeldy" is as nearly a purely descriptive poem as any that we find in his works, but Burns could not leave it without a "Bonnie Lassie will ye go." think, too, of his writing about the lower creation. No one ever wrote of them with the same sensitive heart. For him, as for Jeremy Bentham, anything that suffers has rights." And the gem of poetry chiselled out of a pitiful heart "on seeing a wounded hare limp by me which a fellow had just shot at," will live long after men have ceased to inflict pain on dumb animals for the sake and in the name of sport. But even when he speaks of dumb animals, it is always the one interest that is uppermost. Take the familiar thought for the mouse, and note how his thoughts lead him, we might almost say in spite of himself, to thoughts about mankind, so that he joins our pity about the "wee, sleekit, cowrin', tim'rous beastie" with even a stronger pity for human lot, which is often at the mercy of ill—chance.

For Burns man is always foremost in his thoughts and is for him a background or a parable of the life of man. Everything human consumes his heart. He is pre—eminently

the poet of man, and it is this fact which has made him so universally poet and man. This supreme interest that Burns had in man and his consuming passion for everything human which does not seem to have been recognised and insisted upon by Burns' students as it ought, throws light on one or two points in connection with him which ought to be borne in mind. The man whom each one knows best is himself, and the human heart with which all of us are most closely acquainted is our own. Burns knew himself. He had a very shrewd idea of his own greatness and he was under no delusion as to his own weaknesses. Intensely interested in everything human he was naturally intensely interested in himself. No man known, to fame has been so self—revealing as was Robert Burns.

He knew well enough that men in general do not wear their hearts upon their sleeves, that thoughts come into the minds of all of us, and moods settle temporarily upon our hearts, we must not for the life of us have our fellows know, and he did not shrink from giving on the subject good, wordly advice,
"Ay free aff ham', your story tell,
When wi' a bosom crony,
But still keep something tae yersell,
Ye scarcely tell tae ony."

But that is not advice that can be followed by the poet of man. His genius bursts the bounds of his prudence and his human heart, that he knew best, was laid bare in all its moods, grave

and gay, serious and uproarious, his great human soul was revealed freely and fully as other men's are not, for the delight and instruction of men. While self—revelation, which is the secret of his marvellous human appeal, has sometimes been for small—souled men nothing more than a ground for attacking his follies, as if a man were to look at the sun through a telescope and complain of the spots that he saw there revealed, and ignoring the fact that, regardless of these spots, it is flooding the earth with light and heat. That is an attitude of mind against which we have all to guard in our common life, but an attitude of mind which, when it is assumed in regard to a great genius and benefactor of his race like Robert Burns by those who are not worthy to unloose the latches of his shoes, is dis—gusting, ungrateful and contemptible. It was, it seems to me, too, his interest in men and his intense love of all things human that decided the attitude he adopted in regard to what in some places passed for religion in those days. Burns was far too human, it seems to me, not to be a religious man, but he was also far too human to with the crude Calvinism which was preached as Christianity from some Ayrshire pulpits that he knew. What is the criticism that we have to make of that grim doctrine of predestination that

"Sends ane to heaven, and ten to hell,
A' for Thy glory;
And no' for ony guid or ill
They've done before Thee."

But simply this, that it is inhuman, that such a God is not worthy to be worshipped by a man. Burns flings away with indignant scorn the idea that man's destiny depends on any arbitrary judgment in the counsels of the Almighty or in any opinion that man may hold, and takes a manly stand upon the faith that it is a man's character, and that

alone, which will determine his destiny with the great Creator and Father of all living. He held that man was greater than all the creeds, and that to be human and kind was nobler than to be orthodox. His religion is based upon the manly virtues of kindness and integrity. He has a fine appreciation of homely piety and simple worth. He clings with a noble courage through all his struggles to the hope of a greater life beyond the grave. He believes that a juster judge than man controls the destinies of human kind, and while he will not bow the knee to priest or lord, he is ready to humble himself in penitence before his God. This is a manly faith, and one that we might all seek after. But the greatest contribution that Burns made to his kind as the poet of man was to give to man as man a new dignity and make the common men and women among whom he lived and of whom he sang, conscious of their own inherent greatness. He lived in the days of the American and French Revolutions, in that era when what we now know as modern democracy was being born. 'The driving force behind this great movement was the doctrine of the worth of man as man, the belief that all men were born free, and that, however different men might be in worldly position, as men they were all equal in the sight of God. No one has ever sung those truths so nobly or so passionately as did Robert Burns. Rank and race and honours are but the ornaments that deck him, beneath them all is the one thing that matters, the human heart of the man, and whether he is rich or poor is a matter of insignificant importance. Burns wrote the anthem of democracy, the song of man as man.

"Is there for honest Poverty
That hings his head, and a' that?
The coward slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that
For a' that, and a' that,
Our toils obscure, and a' that.
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that."

The pith of his message, so far as I can read it, is that the real hope of man lies, not in any political measures or social schemes of reconstruction, however necessary in their own way these may be, but in the heart of man. When the hearts of men, both rich and poor, are big enough to clasp hands as men with men across the paltry divisions of class and place which divide us, the day of His desire will come. Nothing outside of the Gospels themselves can prepare men's hearts better for that day than a study of the poetry of Burns and a mutual love on the part of members of all classes of society for his works. Although it is true that there are grievous divisions still, that separate us one from another, anyone who knows our history can see that we are getting, slowly in many different ways, nearer to the ideal of brotherhood among men. We are getting to know each other better. The day of human brotherhood must come.