

MAJOR NIALL McPHERSON IMMORTAL MEMORY . (1949)

Major MacPherson in proposing "The immortal memory," said: One hundred and ninety years ago to—day "-there was a lad was born in Kyle" in the; midst of a violent storm. A little more than 37 years later, the whole town of Dumfries, including two regiments stationed there at the time, among whom was a future Prime Minister, paid the last honours to this same Robin. Men mourned for him when he died who would not have condescended to speak to him when alive. Many a man has received a more lavish funeral only to be quickly forgotten — Robert Burns was to be remembered, and honoured more and more as the years passed by. To—day the date of his birth is being celebrated by far more people than were contained in all Scotland in his lifetime. There is no other man in all the world in whose honour so many clubs and societies exist to—day. Not only in vast assemblies and at sumptuous dinners, but also in wayside taverns and in humble houses — Songs of his fashion bring the swains together. And of all the gatherings tonight, if Burns were t.o be given a night off from his celestial duties, I think he would most likely choose to be here. That is why I feel so deeply honoured in being invited to propose this toast here to—night. How comes it that millions of men of Scottish ancestry, and even a few thousand Englishmen, celebrate this man who was born and died in what are discreetly known as humble circumstances?

To that question you will all have your own answer, but may I give you mine? Was it not because he loved his fellowmen, he loved his country, he loved the countryside and the simple things of life, he loved nature, he loved liberty and he loved the lassies — and he had the genius and inspiration to put his feelings into language that all can understand, as well as to write the best satires and descriptive verse in the Scottish tongue. My own introduction to Burns was through his lyrics, and I would not have wished it other—wise, for no poet in the world has left so great a volume of pure lyric beauty. I learned some of these songs where they should be learnt, at my mother's knee or standing beside her at the piano, at an age when I was better able to appreciate the Scottish air than the symmetry and perfection of the words, let alone the depth of passion in their meaning. As I grew up, I came to understand and admire the poetry which had already become a part of me. You do not need to have a very clear view of what an exciseman is or does to join with gusto in the rollicking strains of "The De'il's awa' wi' the Exciseman," nor do you need to have much experience of courting to be captivated by the lingering melody and touching words of "Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon," or the more passionate "My Love is like a Red, Red Rose." And the sublime yet simple devotion of the song

I could range the whole world o'er  
For the sake of somebody.

cannot fail to evoke in the young and ardent, an echo which in constancy is likely to differ from the comparatively fleeting passions of our poet. Indeed, Burns would himself have been surprised at the soundness of his influence, at least as far as conjugal fidelity is concerned.

The reason lies not so much in the fact that he himself made an excellent husband — kind, considerate and affectionate, even although his tolerant wife is recorded as having exclaimed: "Our Rob could hae done wi' 'twa wives." It is rather to be found in the pure expression that he gives to the feelings and aspirations of true love, that are not the privilege of any class or trade, prince or poet, but are nod's gift to kindly honest youth.

If it is as a lyric poet that Burns takes a foremost place in world literature, it is not for that, or at least for that alone, that he has so many devotees all over the world. It is not the poems we honour to—night — they are not a mere memory; they are alive and will live as long as the language in which he wrote is spoken. It is the man — all that he was, all that he stood for, all that he has achieved.

It is Burns the patriot not Burns the poet, the lover of liberty not the lover of lassies and lyrics, that we celebrate. Burns the patriot: In Burns's day Scotland had almost ceased to be regarded as a nation. She had sold her independence for a matter of £400,000. "Have we not bought the Scots and the right to tax them?" said the Lord Treasurer at Westminster, shortly after the Union. True, she kept her own legal system, but in

matters of law—making her 45 representatives in the Commons and 16 in the Lords, were out—voted by a crushing English majority that did not scruple to favour the interests of Ulster, and even of their own German ally, to the detriment of Scotland. The country was governed like a province by a friend of the powers at Westminster. He was not called a provincial governor, whether he happened to be the Whig Duke of Argyll or the Tory Henry Dundas, but the reins of power lay in his hands, and he manipulated them with a shameless patronage that would have shocked Tammany Hall. Not that the only beneficiaries of this patronage were always of the so—called privileged classes Dundas prided himself on being a self—made man — but the dice were heavily loaded in their favour. Nor was there absence of progress — and, indeed, there was much room for it. While Burns was getting his first taste of life at Kirkoswald, and was wallowing in the treacherous sentiment of MacKenzie's "Man of Feeling," Henry Dundas at last relieved the position of miners and salters in Scotland, who, up to that time had been virtually slaves.

Against this domination Scotland had twice risen in revolt, in the 50 odd years that passed between the Act of Union and the birth of Burns, but the last hopes of Scottish independence were quenched on Culloden Field in 1746. That the restoration of the Stuarts even in a separate Scottish kingdom would have meant the boiling—up of religious troubles once more and a serious set—back in the development of political freedom, was highly probable. Nevertheless, the fact that James VI was Scotland's last king was enough to win the patriotic support of Burns. For Burns was a Scottish patriot before he was a British one. In those days Scotland was not ever accorded the right to defend herself. Its Highland regiments were graciously permitted to win glory for England on the battlefields of Europe and America, but in 1775, Scotland was refused the right to raise her own militia to defend her coast line from the French even when they landed on the North of Ireland. Seeing Scotland treated as an appendage of England, hardly even entitled to keep her own name; seeing it oppressed with new taxes, discriminated against in trade, riddled with patronage and corruption and ruled by an aristocracy that took its manners and instructions alike from London, Burns felt an overmastering urge to do something for his native land. His loathing of domination, his hatred of privilege, his detestation of hypocrisy, all combined to make him the champion of freedom —

whether it was the freedom of Scotland, of the American colonies oppressed by George III and his obedient ministers, or of the French people oppressed by a crushing bureaucracy and a careless and idle nobility. Burns looked forward to the time when "man to man

the world o'er shall brothers be" but he was no less determined that Scots should be Scots, and proud of it. His idea of the brotherhood of men was one that recognised yet transcended the hints of nationhood. What he sought to do for Scotland, as his own mission

in life, was to preserve her matchless heritage of folk—melody, and to restore the flagging art of writing verse in homely Scots. In both he succeeded beyond his dreams. Acknowledged in his own lifetime as Caledonia's Bard, he lives to-day as Scotland's beloved poet — a distinction with a difference.

What he sought to do for Scotland, he amply achieved. But he did far more than he set out to do. Himself half northern, half southern, he represented most that was best in his race, kind, generous and God—fearing, intolerant of hypocrits, and even prone to challenge authority, "contented wi' little and cantie wi' mair,"

believing "an honest man's the noblest work of God," and that "the man of independent mind is King o' men," loving equality yet admiring Worth and success obtained through Worth, honouring the family as the core of our national life and winking from none of his own personal family responsibilities, delighting in good company and good fellowship and determined at all costs to "maintain his intrinsic dignity as a man," he set the seal upon the Scotsman's pattern for himself. This dear, lovable, wayward Robin brought Scotsmen back to a sense of nationhood and destiny. As one brought up

himself in decency and order, he well understood that there is no liberty without order. "Be anarchy curs'd and Tyranny damn'd" he wrote. But above all he longed for a free Scotland and free Scotsmen. For this undying inspiration towards freedom, under which we have moved far since his day, but still have some way to go, Scots all over the

world cry to—night, "So blessings on the., Robin".