

R. H. BRUCE LOCKHART — IMMORTAL MEMORY. (1951)

Sir Robert H. Bruce Lockhart, the author, journalist, and diplomat proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the annual dinner of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club in the Globe Inn, on 25th January, 1951. Sir Robert was educated at Fettes College, Edinburgh, and in Berlin and Paris. He was appointed a Vice—Consul in the Consular Service in 1911, and was acting Consul—General in Moscow from 1915-17. In 1918, he went to St. Petersburg and Moscow as the head of a Special Mission to the Soviet Union. He was arrested by the Russians and imprisoned in the Kremlin, but was later released and exchanged for Litvinoff. Later he was appointed Commercial Secretary to the British Legation in Prague. He resigned in 1922, and after a period in banking in Central Europe, he became a professional journalist in 1928.

Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart in proposing the toast of "The Immortal Memory," said:— I thank you for the great honour you have done me in in-viting me to submit "The Immortal Memory" of the man who has meant, and still means, more to Scots all over the world than any other Scot. And now I must make a contrite and humble confession —.this is the first Burns dinner that I have ever attended in Scotland, and this is the first time I have set foot in Dumfries. You may be sure that I approach my task tonight with deep humility and a proper sense of my delinquency. I see that this is your 63rd anniversary dinner, and 63 is my own age. Doubtless you will say that I have had an indecently long while in which to repent, and that I have stood to—day on hallowed ground — hallowed for two reasons; first, because it was here that Bruce started the war for our independence, and, secondly, of course, because it was here that Burns spent his last years, wrote the last of his immortal songs, and enacted the final tragedy of his all—too—short life. To—day I have seen your river, and it recalled to me at once the poem which has always been my favourite. I refer, of course, to "O were I on Parnassus Hill" and to the line "But Nith maun be my Muse's Well." Written when he came to Ellisland, it is perhaps the finest lyric ever written in any language. You will not expect me to talk of Burns' poetry to you to—night, and, still less, quote him to you. Indeed, to such an audience it would be an impertinence on my part. You will also not expect me to explore the troubled background of his life. Poetic genius is wayward, and in all countries the great poets have mostly died young.

What I should like to say to—night is a few words about what Burns has meant — socially, culturally, and nationally — to Scotland and to Scots and about what we have still to learn from him to—day. Let me begin with the social influence which was strong in several directions, and first let us consider his conviviality. He is to—day the symbol and fountainhead of that hospitality and good— fellowship which bring us Scots together all over the world to seek a respite from our labour in the national drink, which, with golf and curling, is Scotland's greatest contribution to the relaxation of humanity, but, above all, to remember in companionship that we are Scots and that Scotland means something more to us, as it indoubtedly meant to Burns, than "Feet, Scotland, Feet" or the "Hampden Roar."

In our drab and over—organised life of to—day, his capacity to run wild on occasions is a reminder to us that we are not mere robots, and that the first duty of a good democrat is to defy or at least mistrust the central government. We need more of his virile and convivial spirit to—day. Indeed, we also need more of the national spirit which he sang and praised so often. Heaven forbid that I should stray into politics to—night, but when I think what a centralised government has done to our national drink, and when I find — and I have verified the facts — that to—day London agents are selling Danish and Dutch whisky to Scotland, then I feel that unless we react vigorously we deserve our fate. Burns was a "gauger," and, if not born in a Highland

distillery, I was brought up in one, but you will remember his earnest cry and prayer to the Scottish representatives in the House of Commons in 1785:—

“ Tell them wha hae the chief direction,  
Scotland and me's in great affliction,  
E'er ain' they laid that curst restriction  
On aqua—vitae;  
An' rouse them up to strong conviction,  
An' move their pity.”

Well to—day we have austerity, and no one wants to see a drunken Scotland. But, for the life of me, I cannot see why we should be denied our fair share of our national drink. And you see how in this, as, indeed in other matters, Burns' words are as true and topical to—day as they were when they were written. Conviviality, however, was only one aspect of his social influence. He was also the great opponent of cant, hypocrisy and unfair privilege, and to the end the shafts of his wit and irony were directed against tiresome tyrannies and petty pomposities. He was, too, the constant champion of a square deal for the under—dog, and of equality, not of talent and ability, for that, I think, can never be, but of equality of opportunity. And here if, in a century when money was god, he was ahead of his times, much for which he fought has been achieved. Above all, he was a fighter of devils, and here, if I may say so without offence, I think that the great virtue of Scottish education and of Presbyterianism has been that they encouraged the excellent practice of fighting devils. Like Burns, we must be great fighters of all sorts of devils, and generally we used to prevail, although on suitable occasions, especially on Saturday nights, we did not mind the devil winning a round or two. I am not sure that we are so goon or so zealous in fighting devils to—day. I turn now to the more serious and more important subject of Burns' influence on our culture and on our national character, and here some \_ explanation is necessary. Culture and national character are, of course, closely related. Now national character is a curious thing. It is not instinctual. Indeed, so far as human beings are concerned, the only instinctual behaviour which is recog—nised by scientist to—day is the sucking reflex of the new—born child; in other words, the instinctual desire of the infant for the bottle. National character, in fact, is formed when the bulk of a people living together undergo a common learning and acquire shared habits and shared emotions. Similarly, national culture, developed from this common learning by poets, artists, and musicians, takes its imprint, partly, of course, from the national character of the people, but also from the physical character of the country, that is to say, from its landscape and climate.

So you see, neither national character nor national culture is innate in a race. Both are acquired and both can be lost. In particular, a small nation which neglects its own schools, its own learning, and its own language can lose in time both its national character and its national culture. Let me Say, too, that more often than not small countries lose their national characteristics more by apathy and neglect than by any other factor. In this respect, Scotland has been at times in some danger. It is the great service of Burns to his country that by the use of inspired language he was able to give full expression to the national temperament and to perpetuate in the memories of succeeding generations Scottish words which assuredly would now have been lost. To—day the full importance of his con—tribution is recognised, for in the literary renaissance which I hope and believe heralds a great Scottish revival in all spheres of our national life, Burns stands half—way between the "makars" and the young Lallans poets of to—day. Language is the great binder of national culture, and it will be a sad day for Scotland if ever the language of Burns is forgotten and Scots becomes merely

English with a Scottish accent. In this respect, I have heard, that different times, more than one Scottish philologist assert that to—day most Scots read Burns with the same difficulty as an Englishman reads Chaucer, that Burns himself wrote in the Northumbrian dialect, and that he would have rendered a greater service to the world if he had written in literary English. Well, the first statement is at best a gross exaggeration, the second is a philological quibble, and the answer to the third is that Burns was a genius who by a judicious admixture of Scots words and Scots phraseology was able to give a genuine resonance and flavour to his poetry which, to quote his own letter on the subject, he found "more in unison with the simple pathos or rustic sprightliness of our native music than any English verses whatever." Some of his poems are in the best vernacular, but the bulk was not, and it conquered not only Scotland but the world. When I first went to Prague in 1920, I found a Czech verse translation of his works published in 1892; that is, long before Czechoslovakia existed. The pre—face shows that Burns' passion for freedom found a lively echo in Czech hearts.

I do not think that it is possible to—day or even desirable to create an artificial Scottish language, particularly if it reached the length of being unintelligible to the English—speaking world or to the vast army of Scots in the Empire or the United States, but I am entirely in favour of further experiments in the Burns or any other type of admixture of language which will strengthen the special character of our literature. We live in a world in which modern science has abolished distance. It has not brought the nations nearer together nor has it given us peace. On the contrary, it has divided Europe into two camps, and to-day the western world has to unite to defend its civilisation and its very existence. If this unity has to be created successfully, increased centralisation of defence is inevitable. Another desideratum is a common language that all can understand, and which will serve as a constant for Western unity. During the last war nearly all the difficulties that arose between us and our Allies were caused by misunderstandings of language.

Now how will these post-war international developments affect Scotland? Well, without entering into political controversy, I think that two tendencies are clearly visible. First, in order to ensure greater efficiency of the centralised organisation of defence, there will have to be an increasingly large measure of federal devolution in all other matters. Secondly, fewer Scots - will leave Scotland. When I was a boy, it was taken almost for granted in every poor home that any young man with brains would have to go abroad to earn his living. And for two hundred years the exodus has been heavy, not only to the Empire, but to India and the Far East where the history of the last hundred years has been it largely by Scots. To-day these opportunities have been severely restricted. More Scots, I think, will now tend to remain in Scotland, and we shall have to make it a better and richer country. If we are spared a third World War, the result of these two tendencies will be, I feel sure, to give to Scotland an increasingly larger measure of control of its own affairs. The shape and the speed of this devolution will depend to a large extent on our unity, our wisdom and our national will-power. And here again, Burns is a true guide and a sound one. To his genius as a poet he added other qualities which give him the affection of all mankind: the human virtues of charm, of wonderful conversational powers, of a dynamic and virile zest of life, and human weaknesses which endear him to us the more. Indeed, there can be few Scots who do not feel that there is something of Burns, the man, in all of us. But perhaps his greatest appeal to Scots is the fact that in the best sense of the word he was a Scottish patriot. He was, I think, the first man to protest openly against the use of the word English to cover everything Scottish, and he is to-day a living reminder that

freedom demands constant vigilance and that poets are its best defenders. Many politicians die before their bones do. Poets may burn themselves out quickly, but their creative genius survives the centuries and is as ageless as the everlasting hills. Himself intensely human, Burns has done more than any other Scot to inspire us with a deep and enduring sense of our independence and of our national culture, and for this reason his fame grows with the years and his guiding star shines brightly, more brightly than ever, over the new and vigorous Scotland of to-day. In this spirit and with grateful acknowledgement of the debt which all Scotland and all Scots owe to him I give you the immortal memory of Robert Burns.