

## REV WILLIAM ROCK IMMORTAL MEMORY (1952)

Rev. William Rock, minister of Irongray, proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the annual dinner of the Burns Howff Club which was held in the Globe Inn last night. Mr Rock, in proposing "The Immortal Memory," said that wherever Scotsmen met that night they would celebrate the memory of Robert Burns, from across the seas thoughts would turn to those places and scenes that formed the environment of his life and helped to make him. Truly, year by year his fame increased — year by year his birthday was honoured more widely and enthusiastically than that of any other man of genius in the world — truly, there was something in their poet that defied all time. Continuing, ice. Rock said:

So to--night we sing the immortal Burns, not his frailties or his defects, not the buck but the kernel, not the details of language and metre, but the message and beauties of the poet. :Tot for a moment would I inflict upon you either a technical linguistic study or a long historical sketch — I would just like to say that I am no believer in any artificial revival of an old language and further that I dislike intensely the man with the muck—rake prodding among the evident details of the story. I have always objected to the anatomical method

of stripping any man to his bare bones and holding up his faults for everyone to see — faults 'which were as much the measure of the time as of the man. This "midden" method of writing or talking about people misses the mark, especially in the case of one who has left a message for the ages. No-one, I'm sure, objects to honest and helpful criticism, but, if it is to be such, then it must be directed towards the man's message and it must also have regard to what had been accepted in the poet's own time and to its power and vision for the days to come.

While on the subject of criticism, let me also remind you that Burns saved the vernacular, at a time it had fallen into disrepute. Burns revealed the pith and the melodic beauty which was in the heart of the old tongue of the northern race. He stood forth as the poet of patriotism. He showed how the native fields and the simple loves and lives of the people looked when seen through Scottish windows and interpreted by the unspoiled Scottish heart. Through him passed on the rural life with its superstitions — the town life with its Bohemian outlook — the great story of national struggle — the fun, the fuddle-, and the religiosity which all lay at the back of Scottish humanity, and which have not quite passed away. Yes — Burns gave us not only a. revival of vernacular literature and of national life, but he set the light of memory above passing things which otherwise would have lost their beauty and perished utterly. Freedom shared with love the burden

of Burns's songs, for, remember, in his day the national feeling was somewhat tame and colourless. Scotland had been through times of domestic troubles, but war had at last taken wings and gone elsewhere. The spear had become a pruning hook when the poet was born, and putting on the garment of song, he kindled again the long forgotten emotions of freedom and of an honourable love of country that had at one time inspired the life of the nation. No sympathy had he for the slavish heart and mind — even less for the man who would destroy the institutions of the country.

I put it to you to—night, that our Bard's eyes were filled with a prophetic vision of what we to—day know as the United Nations Organisation, and that spirit which now dominates U. N. O. was anticipated in these seldom-quoted lines:-

'Peace, thy olive wand extend2

And bid ? war his ravage end:

Man with brother Man to meet,  
And as a brother kindly greet.'

And I think that the same thought can be applied to the realm of industry to-day. Since the days of Burns, industry and commerce have been enriched out of all knowledge, and science and invention have opened up new and great possibilities. Yet there is one problem which we are irritatingly slow in solving and that is how men can best live and work together in peace. 11r. Churchill at Ottawa said, 'Peace does not sit untroubled in her own vineyard.' It may be that we don't always smile upon each other as brother men; but I think it is heartening that there has been much less of the old suspicion and distrust springing up between those who run industry with their brains and those who work for it with their hands. We may invent, reform and invoke the aid of politics and economics -but all in vain both national and international difficulties realise the wealth of Burns's philosophy, and meet with one another as brothers. To-day I should like to think there is a greater desire to meet and to co-operate and talk things over, and because of that, Burns is something more than a poet, in fact we might almost claim him as a prophet. Life in Scotland to-day is vastly different from what it was in Burns's time - changes have come - many and quickly - some of them we welcome - some we deplore. Many of our grand old customs and habits are fast disappearing, and that is undoubtedly a blow to the fabric of our society. Scots folk - many of them have emigrated to other lands and their place taken here by alien peoples. None the less, I think there is still a real interest in our Scottish traditions, and certainly our commerce and industry have revived to a high degree. You are all aware of the movement for Scottish self-government, and while not wishing to enter into any discussion on the matter, I do feel that if this policy is going to threaten in any way the unity of these islands at a time like this, then it is to be deplored. True, we would preserve all that is highest and best in our Scottish way of life and living, but let us do so with wisdom, and I feel that if our poet were with us to-day, he would say that the best tribute we can pay to him would be to see to it that the spirit of his songs is expressed in our way of living now, and that we be a people characterised by justice, humanity and goodwill to all men. Someone once said that "the true lyric poet not only feels more deeply than common men, but expresses his own feelings so vividly that he becomes the voice of all the joys and sorrows of common humanity." So was it with Burns. What a wonderful power of sympathy: Nothing seems outside the range of this great-hearted soul. He sympathises with the mountain daisy, with the wee courin', timorous beastie', with the twa dogs sporting by the roadside, with the auld mare Maggie, with the Jolly Beggars carousing in Poosie Nansie's Inn, with a' Jock Tamson's bairns - every creature - from "man made to mourn" to the very De'il himself. Yes he is the apostle of human brotherhood, and this along with his verbal magic and artistry, has made him our immortal bard. Mr Rock quoted examples from Burns's poems on freedom, friendship and fellowship, rapture, happiness, and proceeding said:— Listen to his commonsense Christianity — see his picture of the real man — the man who makes the most of his opportunities, relishing his stewardship before God and using his gifts for the blessing of his fellows:

'For thus the royal mandate ran,  
Then first the human race began;

"The social, friendly, honest man,  
Whate'er he be —  
'Tis he fulfils great Nature's plan,  
And none but he:"

Let's sum it all up and let's ask ourselves the question so many have asked from the beginning of time — Where are true happiness and lasting satisfaction to be found? Listen to Burns as, out of his experience, he tells us where they can not be found:

'It's no' in titles nor in rank;  
It's no' in wealth like Lon' on bank,  
To purchase peace and rest;  
It's no' in makin' muckle mair,  
It's no' in books, it's no' in lear,  
To make us truly blest;  
If happiness hae not her seat  
An' centre in the breast.  
-We may be wise, or rich, or great,  
But never can be blest;  
Nae treasures nor pleasures  
Could make us happy lang;  
The heart ay's the part ay  
That makes us right or wrang.'

Such are the elemental facts of human life and destiny sung for us by our own poet: his songs are ours, the songs of Bonnie Scotland, our heritage from Robert Burns. My task is done — it only remains to say that the poor frail vessel now lies mingled with the dust of the land he loved: let it lie, but let the sympathy, the truth and the vision remain to move our hearts and guide our steps.

Please rise and drink to "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns."