

MR. JOHN STURGEON — IMMORTAL MEMORY. (1956).

Mr. John Sturgeon, a former president and a member for twenty years of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club, proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the club's anniversary dinner, which was held in the Globe Inn, Dumfries, on Wednesday evening, 25th January, 1956. In an interesting address, in which various aspects of the Poet's works and life, and the particular merit of Burns compared with other great poets, were stressed and illustrated. Mr. Sturgeon drew a sharp distinction between Burns and Shakespeare and said that the two poets were not only so utterly unlike in the subjects about which they wrote, but in their method of approach and execution they were poles apart.

Proposing the principal toast, Mr. Sturgeon said it was very important to remember that a country became great only in the same measure as it produced great men, and Robert Burns had done infinitely more than any other Scotsman within memory to put Scotland in the forefront of the nations. Many others had, of course, made considerable contributions and a great host of names immediately sprang to mind — names like Lindsay, Dunbar, Scott, Carlyle, Hogg, Fergusson, Anderson and many more. But above them all Burns stood supreme. He had that delicacy and truthfulness of touch possible to only one of nature's gifted sons. He was often compared by critics and biographers with Shakespeare, but, of course, the comparison was quite impossible. The two poets were not only so utterly unlike in the subjects about which they wrote, but in their method of approach and execution, they were poles apart. In the case of Shakespeare they stood dazzled at a respectful distance from him. His genius was bright and over-powering, but lacked the warmth of feeling which Burns put into everything he wrote. Burns did not write about Mercury or Minerva, but about Scotland, the place Scots lived in, the people they knew, the folks they loved, about their hopes and fears, their joys and sorrows, and all the intimate little things of their daily life. Not only that but he spoke in a language which even the lowliest among them could understand. When one read and studied Burns, he became so intimate that one felt that one had known him for life and had mourned at his death. One felt as if one knew him better than one knew the man next door. After referring to the humanity of Burns and his dislike for all things that smelled of hypocrisy, Mr. Sturgeon went on to speak of the hard conditions which existed during Burns' lifetime. He said that perhaps a little bitterness might have entered into the poet's soul, the bitterness born of privation and overwork, that same bitterness which he used to such good effect in "Holy Willie's Prayer," the poem which very definitely put pain to the absurd and cruel creed of John Calvin. "Had Burns done nothing else in his life," said Mr. Sturgeon the fact that he ridiculed Calvinism almost out of existence must make us for ever truly grateful. The tyranny of the Scots Kirk never suffered a shrewder blow to its self-righteous intolerance than was administered to it in "Holy Willie's Prayer."

Speaking of Burns' different moods, his humour, his wit, and his lyricism, Mr. Sturgeon added:— "People never cease to wonder what would have happened to Burns had he by chance of fate been born into better circumstances and a more comfortable and easy mode or life, and I personally think that the answer is tilt we would have had another Milton or Shakespeare. I base this assumption mainly on the fact that he was such a genius and such an apt pupil. I suppose that during the past 150 years, fewer than a round dozen or so of the speakers who have proposed this toast have failed to comment on the darker side of Burns' character, and while many descry this tendency on the part of speakers, my own opinion is that we should talk about this aspect of his nature, not that we would care to condone his many lapses from the straight and narrow path, but so that everything should be kept in its proper perspective. It is

perfectly true, as will be readily admitted, that if you keep on slinging mud hard enough and often enough, some of it in the end is bound to stick. It will also be admitted, I am sure, that one of the first aims of any Burns Club or St. Andrew's Association, or any other kindred body, must be to keep the poet's memory fresh and green and to make perfectly sure that the younger generation do not get a distorted picture of his life. Can you imagine the effect on a young and impressionable mind that the reading of James Barke's novels might have, or the effect it might have on his conception of Burns had he never read any of the really good biographies of the poet. That is a danger that is ever-present and one that Burns Clubs would do well to guard against. "When I was a very young lad attending Communion classes with a view to joining the church, I can well remember one of the lectures we got from our minister. His subject was "Evil Thoughts," with a very easily understood explanation of how they could lead to evil deeds, and his parting statement to the class that night was:— 'Always remember, children, that although you can never stop the birds from flying over your heads, you can and must prevent them from building their nest in your hair,' I submit to you to—night that the birds have not only built their nests in Barke's hair, but that they have undoubtedly bogged there. There certainly is something there that smells, and it smells very badly. Every street must have its gutter; it is most essential if the street itself is to be kept clean, and everyone present to—night has some little gutter in his life, some little channel down which he can flush his indiscretions or his little errors of judgment, perhaps some unkind deed or some unkind thought, maybe even something worse. We are fortunate inasmuch as we have a chance that these things will be forgotten, but Robert Burns is not quite so fortunate. We have all heard about the fierce light that shines upon the throne, but this is as nothing compared with the fierce spotlight that has shone over the private life of the poet for the Past 150 years. It is always wise to remember that the greater the man the greater appears to be the sin. We have it on the authority of his brother, Gilbert, that up until the age of 23, an age when most young men have already sown their wild oats, Burns was a virtuous man and one at whom no one could point the finger of scorn, and we also know that from the time of his arrival at Ellisland, about 1788, with one outrageous exception, his sexual life was almost blameless. Of the period between these dates so much has been written and his amorous adventures made so well known, it would be superfluous to talk about them further, but we would do well to remember, in considering this question of the poet's infidelity, the temptations to which he was almost continuously exposed. To arrive at any conclusion on this matter, with even approximate fairness, one must take into consideration the times in which he was living, times when there was quite probably not a conscious teetotaller in Scotland, times when the moral standards of the people were very low indeed, times when it was considered almost a virtue to be able to 'carry your liquor like a gentleman.'

If we are to pass judgment on Burns at all, we must of necessity consider him as a whole. Here we have a man, generous, warm-hearted and impassioned, a man who is at once a good friend, a dutiful son, a good and generous brother, a loving husband, and a sincere and affectionate father. Who are we to judge a man of such character? Who are we to judge a man of such complex impulses, impulses so far removed from our understanding that we are totally unable to assess their influence on his conduct? On his death-bed the poet expressed the pious hope that the awkward squad would not be allowed to fire over his grave. How vain this hope has proved is evidenced by the fact that a colossal awkward squad of biographers, critics, editors, and other writers have been busily engaged in firing over his grave for the past 150 years. Some of them have been pretty poor marksmen, of course, and have found themselves

shooting at each other, which is perhaps as it should be, and may in the end prove to be only Poetic justice. Burns himself knew far better than - any observer the extent of his failings."

Let Burns speak for himself:-

"Is there a man whose judgment clear
Can others teach the course to steer,
Yet runs, himself, life's mad career,
 Wild as the wave;
Here pause and, through the starting tear,
 Survey this grave.

 The poor inhabitant below
Was quick to learn and wise to know?
And keenly felt the friendly glow,
 And softer flame;
But thoughtless follies laid him low,
 And stain'd his name:"