

Mr IAN ROSSLYN MITCHELL – IMMORTAL MEMORY

Mr. Ian Rosslyn Mitchell, a Glasgow solicitor, who proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the 70th Anniversary Dinner of the Dumfries Burns Howff Club in the Globe Inn on Friday night, 24th January, 1958, adopted a unique yet delightful manner of paying tribute to Scotland's national poet. He drew on fantasy and on his own imagination to express his views as to why Robert Burns was Robert Burns, and why it was to Burns only that the toast of "The Immortal Memory" was proposed every year, not only in his own country, ' but in countries overseas, and in many languages, including Spanish? Russian, Chinese, possibly Hungarian and oert-ainly American.

Mr. Rosslyn Mitchell's father, who was often described as the best after-dinner speaker in Scotland, proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the Howff Club's anniversary dinner in 1927, and by his address, his son showed that the art of oratory was not confined to one member of the family.

At the outset of his address, Mr. Rosslyn Mitchell said that a problem which had taxed speakers and critics was why was Robert Burns the man he was, and why did people assemble together, as they were that night, to celebrate his memory. He would give them his ideas why Robert Burns was Burns. Everyone had his own ideas, and he was going to submit "The Immortal Memory" in his own way. He did not expect any of them to agree with him, but this was how he thought it all happened.

If they read the learned books on Burns, they would find nearly all the books started by saying that on a cold January night, Robert Burns was born in an old clay biggin'. He thought the story started much earlier - 3500 million years earlier, in fact, when the sun, without which there was no life, burst through heavy clouds for the first time, and at that very moment life became possible and indeed started. That was when Robert Burns became inevitable.

Life was a little bit of protoplasm which was the basis of the bodies of all human creatures. At that time it was like jelly without the flavour, but the flavour came late in the form of genes, the microscopic elements controlling the substances which make up the cells of the body.

There were Conservative genes and Radical genes. The Conservative genes said that what was good enough for their grandfathers was good enough for them, but the Radical genes kept striving after something better, or, if not some improvement, at least a change. No person could ever get through life with-out personifying some inanimate object, and the speaker said he wished to personify the little genes.

They stopped being little chemical microscopic pieces and started taking on bodies of their own. They wanted to do something. They formed bacteria first of all, and later primitive plants and sea animals. They kept an ex-perimenting and eventually they created a fish-like animal which crawled on to the land, so that then there were creatures an the land. These were followed by reptiles, serpents, insects and other forms of life. One day one gene told another that there had been created a very curious creature called homo sapiens — the first man.

From that moment onwards the genes had a different aim. They realised they had got something different from any of the animals, plants or creatures, and soon they had a Neanderthal man and woman. They realised that the Neanderthal population would need a hero, otherwise it was thought they would run riot and cause a great deal of trouble, and the genes asked themselves the question: what characteristics were required?

They created Homer, an old man who was always nodding. That disturbed them a bit, because he did not meet the requirements they were after, and they went on to a more refined type, and Virgil and Ovid came into being. They were not entirely satisfactory

either, because they wrote for the upper classes, although, in fairness to Ovid, it had to be said he was more human in that he wrote of wine and of Bacchus, the God of Wine. Many experiments were tried by the genes afterwards, and they created troubadours, who, said Mr. Rosslyn Mitchell, might be called mediaeval skittle groups. They went round the country strumming on lyres and singing of love. From that day onwards people had been doing the same thing consistently. They were not quite heroes and so Rabelais came into being. He wrote humourously and for the ordinary people, but he did not solve the problem either, and so the genes went on until they created Shakespeare.

"Don't be too prejudiced about the fact that Shakespeare was an Englishman," said Mr. Rosslyn Mitchell. "He could not help it. He, as nearly as anyone had ever done, came to the curious pitch where he might have had an immortal memory. He was a man who wrote admirable plays and verses, and expressed in great words that had never been surpassed, the thoughts and emotions of human beings. He was romantic, exciting and glamorous.

"No one had ever written better plays, but he was not the complete solution to the problem because again a mistake was made in making this character; because he was great for what he wrote and not for himself. Another mistake was in making him a professional, for no one wanted a hero who was a professional. Apart from his writings — if they were in fact his — all that was known about Shakespeare was that he had a wife, and had a sense of humour.

"Time was pressing on and the genes knew that if they did not do something before the industrial revolution, they would get nothing at all done. They formed a production committee who were given full powers and were told they had to try to provide something which human beings could respect, look up to, and love. Money and materials were to be no object/ provided they achieved what was wanted.

The production chief called for reports from the various people who had been working away for many years. The first to be called for, was the one in charge of time — Tempus he was called — who, when asked about the date when the new hero was to come into being, was told it would be 25th January, 1759. In reply to further questions put by him, the production chief was informed that there were still two classes in society, the haves and have-nots, and to ensure that when the upsurge for leadership and guidance was made, their hero would be there.

"Locus, the head of another department in the production committee, was asked if he had chosen the place, and Locus replied he must come into being in Ayrshire in Scotland. The conditions required by Tempus existed in Scotland. The population was not too big and when their hero made his mark, he would be quickly and easily recognised. The people would be in the right condition to hear what he had to say, and in any event his parents were going to be living in Ayrshire at the time.

"When Locus said that he would have to be born in an old clay biggin', the production chief asked why this was so. Locus replied that the person they were creating was to be a hero, but not a military hero; not a man of blood, but a man of kindness. He must be a man born in poverty, and an old clay biggin' in Ayrshire was just the right place. He was to be the hero of the ordinary people and not of the upper classes.

Mr Rosslyn Mitchell went on to refer to other 'members' of the production committee who had been concerned in creating the hero Robert Burns — Sex, Rhythm, Intellect, Temperament. Sex maintained that, to be a success, their hero must have sex appeal: if, he had not, no one would be interested in him. Rhythm stated he was to be a person who would write the most rhythmic verses and songs which would be put to music and which would keep the people dancing and keeping time to the music.

Intellect told the production chief that he knew exactly what the person's intellect was to be. He would be a genius but not an intellectual. He would have an understanding of things better than his friends and colleagues, but he would never upset them nor high—hat them. When Temperament was called in, he said that what they were aiming at was to have a person who, although a genius and a man of tremendous intellectual powers, would be a person of kindness and compassion, and he would be able to fluctuate one way or another. They must make him fond of going along to a place like the Globe and "having a few."

The production chief, a staunch teetotaler, did not approve of this and asked Temperament if it was necessary. Temperament replied:— "You can make him a strict teetotaler if you like, but he won't be Robert Burns.

Can you imagine him drinking milk and then writing 'The Jolly Beggars' or that glorious ride along the Ayrshire coast with Cutty Sark?"

The production chief agreed, and after the plans of the genes had been modified and adjusted, and the pattern of the hero's whole life settled, Robert Burns became a reality on 25th January, 1759.

"You may think I have been a little imaginative," said Mr. Rosslyn Mitchell, "and you may not accept my story, but if you read biology and relate it to the life of Robert Burns, you will find that Burns lived his life and behaved exactly as those genes laid down he would. He was not to be Mr. Robert Burns, but our Robert Burns — the one we are here to—night to commemorate. Any variation, no matter how slight, in his character, temperament, or behaviour, and there would have been no Robert Burns as we know him — the friendly, honest, sociable man who used to spend so many happy hours in this place.

I feel sure my story is as accurate as you will find anywhere, but whether accurate or not does not really matter. The fact is if • there had been any change in his character and make—up his poems and songs would have been different, and we would not be here this evening. We don't come here because Burns wrote verses or songs. We come here because, having written verses and songs, he became known? and Burns having become known we got to know him as a human being, and that is what the genes wanted.

"If you reckon that all over the world to-night and tomorrow night in Spanish, Russian, Chinese? possibly Hungarian, and certainly American languages, there will be people standing up and proposing "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns," don't you think the genes achieved in fact, what they set out to do.?"

"The interesting thing is that, although they have tried since, they have never succeeded again, and in this new world of ours created by genes there will never be a chance for another Robert Burns. I think it would not be inappropriate, seeing we are thinking of him as a very kindly, human being who was a genius and yet an ordinary man, that we might remember him in the words of the American, who was asked if he remembered Burns, and who replied, "Aye, brawly." "