

Mr JAMES AITKEN IMMORTAL (1960)

The Dumfries Burns Howff Club were told the story on Monday night of the village blacksmith who interrupted one proposer of "The Immortal Memory" who described the poet as "a man born before his time." The blacksmith said: "Burns was a Ploughman, wasn't he? Well maybe you can see him perched up on one of those motor tractors, but I can't. And how in the name of fortune could Rabble have written "Tam o' Shanter" if all the pubs had shut at nine o'clock and Tam away home on his old lorry?"-

The Globe Inn was packed on Monday night to hear Hr. Aitken, a Past-President of the London Burns Club and president-elect of the London Caledonian Society, who referred to Burns as the prophet of social security.

Mr. Aitken said that the poet was honoured because he was the mouth,- piece and symbol of what was, perhaps, Scotland's most vital contribution to modern civilisation - her insistence on the dignity and worth of man as an individual, irrespective of rank or wealth. His dictum: "A man's a man for a' that," had become the Magna Carta of thousands in all lands which prize freedom. Burns did not speak intimately to the dismal or the sentimental, the dull or the wordly, the spineless or the fearful. His message was to those who were vital and alive, the lovers and the fighters, men and women of sympathy and imagination and all who carried a singing heart through life's journey. There were those whose only concern was to parade Burns's shortcomings - who would "drag his frailties from their dread abode." They missed the mark. Mr Aitken quoted Mac-gillivray: "I'm for those who seek Burns rather where his spirit leads than where his body has fallen."

Mr. Aitken went on: "Burns may have sinned - he did sin - but he never once glorified in his sin. What Robert Burns experienced in suffering, he taught the world in poem and song. But while the professional Christians of Scotland were "fighting about hell and doctrine" and persecuting those in their power, the Humble cottars by their lowly firesides were 'enriched by the knowledge of heaven.' Burns powerfully portrayed and interpreted them in the best loved poem of Scottish literature. Whether we like it or not that venerable phrase, 'Let us worship God,' is at the basis of Scottish character."

Love of freedom and liberty born in the heart of every Scotsman was in no small measure due to Burns's labours. And just as he denounced the professional Christians of his time so, to-day, he would "smite hip and thigh" the many in Europe who were now posing as democrats and denying freedom to their fellows.

Some 150 years after 'Burns's death we as a nation had been "fighting that evil doctrine" which would deprive us of freedom. Burns preached the natural privilege of all men to freedom of action and worship, not to be surrendered at the challenge of any nation, however powerful in men and arms.

Mr. Aitken pondered the solution to the threat of a future atomic war, and said the solution must surely be that the nations of the earth, as a unit, make effective laws for the outlawry of war itself. Unless Burns's prophetic prayer for universal brotherhood ("For a' that and a' that") was answered, not in any sloppy or sentimental sense, but in real substance, and in our time, civilisation as we knew it would be in a perilous condition. The world must learn the practicability of universal brotherhood just as it had learned Burns's "Auld Lang Syne."

Manhood, freedom, brotherhood, as Longfellow had declared, were the master chords of Burns's gospel, and within that orbit rotated all that the modern mind had conceived in its freedom charters.

Referring to Burns as a philosopher, Mr. Aitken said: "It is a marvel that grows greater the more we try to understand it, that a boy who left school when nine years old, thereafter a steady farm worker; doing a man's job when fifteen, and probably two men's work when he was nineteen, could, after that, be able to write so much immortal poetry and instructive prose. Condemned to struggle on the sterile soil of adversity, his ardor of mind enabled him to triumph over every obstruction, and his conversation is said to have acted like magic on those who heard him."

Every Scot carries snatches of his songs in his head — he can recite them from heart, and the strangest thing of all is that he never learned them from a book. The memory of Burns has been passed down from mouth to mouth.

The speaker went on "H. V. Morton reveals this picture. He tells of an old guide showing him over Burns cottage, who had quoted the lighter part of Burns as he went on. The guide was called away and, when he returned, rather hesitatingly commenced to recite:—

'Thou ling'ring star with less'ning- ray,  
Thou lov'st to greet the early morn,  
Mary: dear departed shades  
Where is thy place of blissful rest?'

Tears gathered in the old man's eyes, and he said: 'You must forgive me but I had a message just now that a very dear friend had passed away. There's something in Burns for every experience of a man's life — good days and bad. I shall find his sympathy here-. Burns would have known just what I feel now. You'll not mind, Mr. Morton, just going on by yourself. Morton makes this comment: 'Robert Burns had there received a tribute which passes the cold understanding of the critics.'

'Had we never lov'd sae kindly:  
Had we never lov'd sae blindly:  
Never met — or never parted,  
We had ne'er been broken—hearted.'

Mr. Aitken quoted Sir Walter Scott as saying, "This is worth one thousand love tales."

The speaker concluded: "What manner of man was this ploughman of the burning eyes? "When the picture is complete we behold a man of supreme gifts, with a proud and independent spirit, yet withal a lovable and magnetic personality.

"Because of what is deep inside us, we are constrained to do homage to him who has endeared himself to our hearts. Burns has been granted the happiest lot that can fall to any patriot; he has remained a living, palpitating force among the Scottish people: he has made there for himself a kingdom; the brightest star in the literary firmament of Scotland — a radiant spirit enshrined forever in the memory of his fellow—countrymen. Please rise and drink to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns