

Mr H G McKERROW IMMORTAL MEMORY (1961)

In spite of hundreds of searching books and documented criticisms, Burns to-day stands on a peak all his own - a solitary, radiant, figure, the greatest lyric poet the world has ever known." This was said by H. G. McKerrow, senior Vice-President of the Burns Federation and Hon. Treasurer of the Burgh of Dumfries, when he proposed the "Immortal Memory" at the 73rd annual dinner of Dumfries Burns Howff Club held in the Globe Inn on Wednesday evening.

In submitting the toast of the "Immortal Memory," Mr McKerrow said it was an astonishing fact that two hundred years after the death of Robert Burns, his birthday was celebrated more widely than that of any other - save one. But, of course, Robert Burns had been an astonishing man. This could not dim the lustre that surrounded

his name. To-day he was revered and loved wherever our tongue was spoken, and elsewhere, too; loved by every heart that had ever thrilled to the call of his homeland, or trembled beneath the touch of love.

Born in obscurity, of humble but loving parents, brought up in appalling poverty? largely self-educated, his father's principal labourer before he was 15 - no wonder his journey was troubled.

His wanderings had hardly extended beyond the confines of his native land, his acquaintance had been limited by his travels, he had striven with unfruitful soil and had left behind only a little more of material possession than he brought. "And now the glory of his name is spread as wide as the world."

How often have we found with great men and great names that after the tumult and the shouting is past, after the clouds round the summit of greatness have had time to settle or been blown away, how often have we found that the mountain is but a tiny hillock. It was not so with Burns. Two hundred years later, in spite of hundreds of searching books and documented criticisms, he stands on a peak all his own, a solitary, radiant figure, the greatest lyric poet the world has ever known.

The century that preceded the birth of Burns, went on Mr. McKerrow, had been a difficult one for Scotland. There had been the persecution of the Covenanters and two loyal but hopeless attempts to restore the Stuarts. It was no wonder that the voice of the singer was unheard in the land. Burns, however, had changed all that.

There burst upon the people of Scotland such a flood of melody as they had never heard before. Burns overflowed with fervent thoughts which found a medium for communication in the language of his country. His poetry did not contain the airy fairy visions of some fantastic dream: it contained the ideals, the hopes, the passions, the loves, and the suffering that dwelt in the hearts of men. He pled for friendly, warm-hearted appreciation of every fine feeling, acknowledging one Father who loved all creation.

The poet achieved the right word spontaneously; he did not spend laborious hours perfecting his work. It had been said that Gray spent six or seven years perfecting his Elegy, and that Leonardo da Vinci spent four years producing the

Mona Lisa. Robert Burns composed his works of art on a lonely walk by the riverside and carried them in his mind until he had time to put pen to paper. No wonder we celebrate the birthday of this astonishing man two centuries later.

It may be that it was in his songs that Burns reached his greatest lyrical heights. This astonishing man poured forth his soul in songs both grave and gay — some the finest in any language — songs that have come down to us as a heritage, a golden heritage, to inspire us with a love of Scotland like his own.

Never could they forget these exquisite songs wedded to Scotia's melting airs. Beauty clung to them as perfume clings to the rose. Burns played on his native language, as a master played on an instrument of music.

Every note rang true, every string quivered with melody. Our hearts throbbed with delight as the first chord was touched.

Did ever lovers, vowing eternal love, promise more lovingly than in "My love is like a red, red rose"? What young heart does not respond to 'Bonnie wee thing'?

The splendid patriotism of 'Scots Wha Hae' and the courageous realism of 'A Man's a Man' have given inspiration to men the world over. What more beautiful than the generous love in 'O' a' the Airts,' the tenderness of 'Oh wert thou in the cauld blast,' the heartbreak of 'Ae Fond Kiss,' the picture of faithful and true love in 'John Anderson my Jo'? — the fine sweet story of two lives from the cradle to the grave, told in two short verses.

Some person whose name I forget, because it wasn't worth remembering, called 'John Anderson my Jo' a sentimental monstrosity. I prefer to say that this is the most perfect and tender song of old wedded love that has ever been given to the world. It is because every man, and woman, finds in the works of the poet mirrored reflections

of his own thoughts, that his works are immortalised and his name incorporated in the history of Scotland. All Scotland is in his verse — his words are the links, the watchwords, the symbols of the Scottish race. While Scotland lives he cannot die: It was in this fine town of ours, during his last years, that Burns was approached by an Edinburgh editor to help in a collection of Scots songs, and he entered into the collection of songs with energy and joy, and hardly a day passed that he did not give the world some snatch of song, mostly composed by the lovely banks of the Nith.

Many songs were his own creation, many he re—created. Many of lilting loveliness, gaiety and laughter, had their origin in bawdy songs of the bothy, the tinker and the roadside. He collected songs which would otherwise have passed into oblivion. He borrowed ideas from his predecessors, but he poured into them the creative genius of his own soul, and purified and illuminated them beyond recognition. He took a handful of rubbish and created a precious jewel. He is acknowledged as the prince of songwriters, and because of his gift as a song writer, this astonishing man has established contact with the people as no other poet ever has.

Mr. McKerrow went on to say that that night he was more convinced than ever before, that the message of our National Poet was alive and essential in the world to—day. In Burns's day it was accepted by the masses that war, poverty and illness were inevitable, but this astonishing man did not accept it as inevitable, and dared to believe that some day, somehow, these things would pass away.

To—day, illness had been enormously reduced and would be diminished still further. To—day, poverty was no longer unavoidable for the majority of the population, and in the years to come they hoped it would be abolished altogether. They prayed, too, that war was no longer inevitable.

Referring to the biblical quotation "Love thy neighbour as thyself", Mr. McKerrow said the problem of the modern world was the failure of the individual

to realise that mankind was one family with common interests. If they were to be happy they must endeavour to ensure the happiness also of their neighbour. To love your neighbour was not just a moral duty preached by the churches, but the wisest policy from the point of view of their own happiness.

The world to—day sorely needs the unshaken belief of this astonishing man that love is stronger than hate, that inward bliss is only obtainable by obedience to eternal law. His life's work is calling to the world to—day, louder and clearer than ever before, and especially this night when we are celebrating the anniversary of his birth. Rise and be upstanding and drink to the Immortal itiemory of Robert Burns.