

REV. J. W. G. MASTERTON — IMMORTAL MEMORY. (1909).

Some people are irritated at the annual dinners and suppers held in memory of Burns, mocking them and sneering at the Burns orators. But it was the Burns Clubs which kept the grass cut on the poet's grave, and tended "the lamp of memory."

This was said by Mr. Masterton, minister of Dunscore Parish, when he proposed "The Immortal Memory" at the Dumfries Burns Howff Club's annual supper held in the Globe Inn on Monday evening.

Remarking that nothing that might be said could add to, or detract from the poet's fame, Mr. Masterton told his audience:— "The laurel wreath is secure on his brow; he is pedestalled in triumph as one of the world's greatest lyric writers."

Therefore, brushing aside the sneers and scorn, let them remember what a remarkable wave of affection and admiration rolled the memory of Burns down the years, and threw thousands together at his time to honour his memory.

For this continuing praise of the poet there were a number of reasons. One of those was our Scottish boastfulness. Our long and violent history had made us a belligerent race. We had to be. We would have been trampled to death long ago if we had not valued our liberty and been prepared to fight and die for it. Therefore, when Scotland won some success, we brag about it with characteristic immodesty. And when, as with Burns, we breed a genius, we trumpet the news to the world.

A second reason for the continuing praise of Burns was found in our sense of gratitude. At the end of the 18th century Scotland was "the most servile and corrupt" part of the Empire. We were poor — and ashamed of it. We were scorned by the English. Dr Johnson said he could smell the Scots in the dark. Then Burns, with the magic wand of his genius, touched and transformed this Cinderella that was Scotland. He gave us back our self-respect, brought laughter into Calvinistic Scotland, gave us songs to sing, songs full of the fire and passion and patriotism, full of the tenderness of love and the tears of parting.

And a third reason for the continuing praise was that Burns helped to explain us to ourselves. The Scots, more than most men, were aware of the duality of their nature, and the tension between flesh and spirit. The life and work of Burns was full of this duality.

We know Burns as a churchgoer and also as a rantin', roarin' boy in the ale-house, as a welcome visitor in manses, and equally welcome in girls' bedrooms. He produced songs of the purest affection, and songs hot with sensuality. One day he movingly confesses his sins to God, the next he shouts 'The Kirk and State may gae to Hell.'

Mr. Masterton said the most powerful reason for our praise of Burns was admiration of his work. He had given us in "Tam o' Shanter" the best short narrative poem produced in English, and, in "Holy Willie's Prayer," one of the finest satires. But it was as a maker of songs that Burns laid hold on the garland of immortality. Out of his rich treasury of songs might be picked his "Red, Red Rose" as the finest lyric in the English language. So long as Scotland lasts, so long as there are honest lads and bonnie lasses to fall in love, and want words to express their emotions, so long will the memory and the sprigs of Robert Burns endure.