

IMMORTAL MEMORY, PAISLEY BURNS CLUB,

25th JANUARY, 1996

Gentlemen, When King Lear asked his daughters to tell him how much they loved him, Cordelia said, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. Well - my heart has been in my mouth for some considerable time - and for three reasons.

First, it is a most prestigious, tho' somewhat daunting task, to be President of the oldest Burns Club in the world. However, apart from a serious attempt on this time-honoured occasion, to ring some changes with an Immortal Memory; I am fortunately by tradition allowed some fun bits, namely, to select the speakers for the evening, to choose the songs I would like to hear, and to ascribe the quotations on the menu. It is also de rigueur for the President to make clear at the outset, with becoming modesty, what may already becoming suspected - that he's very run of the mill - and that the position of President just comes round strictly in order of joining. Of the present full membership of the club, half have had that privilege and experience, with 20 still to come.

Secondly, to hold office in 1996, to play a part in the worldwide commemoration of this bi-centennial year, is really very special in an age when we are in the midst of a spate of very Scottish anniversaries - R.L.S. in 1994; The Bank of Scotland's 300 years since 1695; the '45 Rebellion of course with Culloden to come in mid-April; Thomas Carlyle last year; James Ossian MacPherson this year; the founding of Strathclyde University, i.e. the Anderson Institute in 1896; and let us not forget - now that it is immortalised in print - our own Paisley Golf Club in 1895.

And my third reason is my recent terror lest the BBC on Monday or "The Herald", produce a programme or an article covering the same ground as my address to you tonight - which they haven't quite done - so I want to speak to you now about Burns against the background of what is called the Enlightenment in the second half of the 18th century in Scotland and in contrast, I hope, to some of the rather unenlightened Kailyard type of Burnsomania which we may expect to see and hear during the course of this anniversary year.

In that delightful film, Shirley Valentine, the central character, Shirley, now a plump, middle-aged housewife, as she laments the passing of the girl she used to be, says tearfully, "I've lived such a little life".

In some everyday ways, Burns lived a little life. He never had the vote, he never went abroad, never went to university, never fought a duel, never fought in a war. Apart from four brief tours of Scotland and two peacock spells in Auld Reekie, he spent most of his short life in the west and south-west of Scotland, in places which we might be excused of thinking were fairly similar and limited, moving each time in the desperate hope of finding a better way of life.

However, in other and more important ways, Burns lived a large life. He was, of course, acutely aware of the gap between his rather mundane origins and surroundings on the one hand and his genius and expanding intellect on the other hand. He highlights this tension himself when in the long autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore in 1787 he writes - "My strongest wish is to please my Compeers, the rustic inmates of the hamlet" - and then in another mood he said - "I have ever looked on mankind in the lump to be nothing better than a foolish headstrong, credulous, unthinking mob."

This kind of apparent contradiction is commonly found in Burns. It is not so much inconsistency; it is rather an ambivalence arising out of the particular occasion. For example, the man who wrote in 1785 - "My curse upon your whunstone hearts, Ye E'nbrugh gentry!" - for the way they had treated poor Robert Fergusson, also wrote in the dedication to the Edinburgh edition of 1787 - "I come to claim the common Scottish name.., with the illustrious names of his native land, those who bear the honours and inherit all the virtues of their ancestors... with the sincerest gratitude and highest respect, Your most devoted humble servant." Now this flowery language is like the elaborate flourish of a bow from D'Artagnan. It complies with the ritual courtesies of a society ruled by patronage, but it manages to retain just a soupçon of the mocking spirit of the musketeer.

On another occasion, in a letter to his confidante, Mrs. Dunlop, Burns declared, "I like to have quotations ready for every occasion. They give one's ideas so pat, and save one the trouble of finding expression adequate to one's feelings." So who really believes that? I mean, this from the man who is esteemed above all for his genius in finding just the right expression adequate to one's feelings. Besides, in another letter to the same lady he states clearly - "I have no great faith in unlaboured elegance. I firmly believe that workmanship is the united effort of Pains, Attention and Repeated trial."

So we have to tread carefully, making sure that we don't accept at face value all of Burns's effusions. His was a complex personality; at times it suited his purpose to play the role of "heaven-taught ploughman", the rude, rustic farmer. The truth is he was an extremely independent, well-read and fluent man of the world, a Renaissance figure.

Today, gentlemen, as you look around Scotland, you cannot but be aware of a stirring, a ferment of ideas and a feeling of new activity, not just those developments which affect us in common with the U.K. and the world beyond, like the computer internet or genetic engineering or, Lord help us, women's rights, but an upsurge in things Scottish. The Edinburgh Festival could hardly cope with its numbers this year and the Scottish Tourist Board confidently expects a tourist invasion in 1996 to outdo the increase of 1995. There's a new local government structure after April - and our guest here knows all about that. The Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat parties - quite apart from the SNP - are all vying over some kind of devolution for Scotland. All the arts are flourishing. There's more Gaelic being written today than there has been for generations. There's a new interest in the validity of Scots as a language in its own right. The Runrig and Capercaillie bands enjoy a huge popularity with the younger set. The Scottish theatre is in good heart and last year we even had a Booker prizewinner novelist in James Kelman, the only man I know who can get more "f"s into a sentence than Billy Connolly. There are amongst you tonight men who could tell us in detail of the particularly Scottish advances in, eg. medicine, law, trade and industry but if further proof of a current renaissance in Scottish interest is needed, it must surely be found in the hard-nosed film industry with Bonnie Prince Charlie in "Chasing the Deer", "Robert the Bruce" soon to be premiered, and if Liam Neeson in "Rob Roy" and Mel Gibson in the blockbuster "Braveheart" go to all the trouble of flattering us with their remarkable Scottish accents, then there can be little doubt about the prestige of Scotland today.

It was into this same kind of hotbed of stirring and stimulating society in Edinburgh in the second half of the 18th century that young Robert Burns arrived on a borrowed horse on the evening of 28th November, 1786, just four months after the publication of the Kilmarnock edition of 31st July. His first sojourn in Edinburgh lasted some four months, then came his short tours of Scotland when he enjoyed not only learning how he was respected thro'out the land, but also measuring himself against all whom he met at every level and from every walk of life. The tours were followed by a second stay in the capital of about another four months.

The Athens of the North was bubbling with intellectual life. Since the collapse of the Jacobite cause, Scotland had been ruled from London thro' men like Dundas and Scottish energies had been expended in the new discoveries and scientific pioneering which underlay the industrial revolution of the time. Watt's steam engine created the

modern world and the machinery spawned textile improvements, road, canal and bridge building, improved coal-mining and power for ships. Then political awareness was renewed and heightened in the 70s and 80s with the American War of Independence and news of events in France. In the midst of all this, men of eminence graced the salons of the gentry. Typical of their number was James Hutton, the father of geology, who was born in 1726 and died the year after Burns. He studied at Edinburgh, Paris and Leyden where he graduated in medicine, but was more interested in chemistry and then, because he inherited a farm in Berwickshire, in the study of soil and agriculture. Scotland was a particularly fortunate country for geological investigation with even, e.g., crag and tail evidence in the capital itself but Hutton also travelled a great deal, always observing, deducing, verifying. Farming husbandry in Norfolk, the rocks and river-beds of England, the rugged structure of the north of Scotland, a visit along with James Watt to the salt mines of Cheshire, then time spent in Holland, Brabant, Flanders and Picardy, all this research over more than 30-odd years culminated in 1785 when his life-long work, "The Theory of the Earth", was presented to the recently-created Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Imagine the impact of the concept of eons of time upon people whose biblical teaching of the Creation in 4004 B.C. included vague notions of unknown forces shaping the earth and haphazard speculation about its nature which was more imaginative than scientific. Hutton confronted them with the evidence before their eyes of an evolving world which was older than mankind. By this new scale of immense time, he revolutionised the whole idea of the history of the world.

Similarly, the empiricist ideas of the philosopher, David Hume, were sweeping away old beliefs and his influence spread beyond Scotland to people like Rousseau and Kant in Europe and Hume was recognised as the iconoclast of reason, the atheist who defeated the supernatural and set man free of prejudice. It is no surprise that among his friends were the most able scientists of the day, men like William Cullen of latent heat fame and Joseph Black, the discoverer of carbon dioxide.

One of Hume's closest companions was Adam Smith who had toured in France for three years and corresponded regularly with Turgot and Quesnay. Ten years later in 1776 he published "The Wealth of Nations", one of the seminal books in the history of the world, the foundation of modern economics and a prime example of the Scottish

ability to seek out universal principles through a close examination of the facts. No wonder Voltaire was constrained on one occasion to cry out - "Why do we have to go to Scotland for our ideas?"

All this was meat and drink to Burns. This was even better than his evenings among friends in the Tarbolton Bachelors Club. He revelled in the discussions of the new ideas in the air. We have the testimony of Mrs. Maria Riddell as to his fascinating conversation, what she calls his "unstudied brilliant repartee" and "the rapid lightnings of his eye which were the harbingers of some flash of genius". That was the same recollection which Sir Walter Scott had as a lad of 16 on seeing and hearing Burns. He too remembered how Burns's eyes "glowed when he spoke with feeling or interest". And Edinburgh's Professor of Moral Philosophy, Dugald Stewart, also recalled Burns's acute intelligence and noticed particularly that, "Nothing was more remarkable among his various attainments, than the fluency, and precision, and originality of his language, when he spoke in company, more particularly as he aimed at purity in his turn of expression, and avoided more successfully than most Scotchmen, the peculiarities of Scottish phraseology." That comment, especially coming from a man with a name like Dugald Stewart, reveals the curious situation then, when men who were good patriotic Scots still thought of English as the proper language to use.

There could not be clearer evidence, however, that Burns is playing to his audience, is pirouetting his way thro' the Edinburgh society into which James, the 14th Earl of Glencairn, had provided the introduction. Clearly, Burns's masonic connections helped immensely. The brotherhood of the masons levelled out class distinctions and Burns made many acquaintances this way with people in influential positions. He was, incidentally, specially pleased by the tribute at one lodge meeting when the toast from the chair was to "Caledonia's Bard, Brother Burns". It helped, too, when the compliments which Henry Mackenzie had paid to the ploughman poet in a long review ensured that the literati would all follow suit. Thus Burns was lionised, the darling of the women, envied by the literate and respected by the intellectual -

"What apiece of work is a man!

How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties!

The beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"

So why quit this admiring circle?

Burns had come to Edinburgh in the first place to try to arrange a second edition of his poetry. He was there also because it was a Mecca to which his curiosity and a restless spirit directed him and he may have had some ideas at the back of his mind about an Excise post.

Now, some 15 months after his first arrival in the capital, he had achieved a very successful 2nd, the Edinburgh edition of his poems “altho’ Creech took his time to pay up in full”. The ethereal affair with Clarinda was over.

“To what dark cave of frozen night
Shall poor Sylvander hie,
Depriv’d of thee, his life and light,
The sun of all his joy?”

Actually, we know that Sylvander hied himself a few times into the company of the Highland maid, May Cameron, who saved him from frozen nights. Much more important, he had the assurance of an Excise job for which he would have to undergo training. He was involved in the purchase of Ellisland and he finally recognised Jean Armour as his wife and she would hardly fit in to the sophisticated Edinburgh scene. -

“Content am I, if Heaven shall give
But happiness to thee,
And, as wi’ thee I wish to live,
For thee I’d bear to dee.”

But there was another, overpowering reason for putting Edinburgh behind him. The answer lies in Burns’s nature. In spite of the plaudits of the city and the recognition of him as national poet, in spite of being part of the in-set for a while, he was fundamentally not at ease. Financially, he had to earn a living and support a family. And instinctively, he resented the reverence given to those with rank, money and no talent -

“Ye see yon birkie ca’d a lord,
Wha struts an’ stares an’ a’ that?
Tho’ hundreds worship at his word,
He’s but a cuif for a’ that.”

Burns was aware of a genteel condescension. Just as authority is inimical to the Scottish character, so Burns could accept patronage, but couldn’t stomach being patronised. Again to Mrs. Dunlop, he writes, “I have the advice of some very judicious friends among the literati here, but with them I sometimes find it necessary to claim the privilege of thinking for myself”. That’s our boy!

And it was this attitude, the sturdy independence of a mind, bolstered by the realisation that he was a match for the intelligentsia of the age which gave him the proud self-esteem which makes it difficult for us to swallow the conspiracy theory of Alastair Campsie, the idea that Excise job which Burns the radical had to be muzzled by giving him an involved taking the two oaths of office and allegiance, to carry out his duties honestly and to swear loyalty to George the Third. It is clear

that the initiative came from Burns - he it was who, sick of the drudgery of farming, sought the help of men like Robert Graham and Earl Glencairn in order to get a job which would provide for his family a regular and assured income, what Burns called "a certainty of maintenance" and he made plain his motive in verse -

“Searching auld wives’ barrels,
Ochon the day!
That clarty barm should stain my laurels!
But what’ll ye say?
These movin’ things ca’d wives and weans
Wad move the very hearts o’ stanes.”

It is my belief that after his Edinburgh experience Burns really felt that Scotland owed its national poet at least that.

So, over the next eight years Burns became a gauger, gave up the unrewarding Ellisland farm and moved to Dumfries where he died on 21st July, 1796, and four days later huge emotional crowds of thousands mourned his passing and lined the streets as his body was borne to its grave in St. Michael’s churchyard.

And then the early biographers got a hold of him. Without Burns there to defend himself or to set the record straight, what they could not establish factually, they were free to conjecture “creatively”. Dr. James Currie’s line was habitual drunkenness, the fall of a genius thro’ debauchery. Robert Heron, a contemporary of Burns and a third-rate journalist, wrote a jealously vindictive memoir, full of error and half-truths. The “Reliques of Robert Bums” by Robert Cromek rather slavishly repeated Currie’s views. Then came lives by John Lockhart and so-called gentle Allan Cunningham with the result that by the middle of the 19th century we are getting biographies culled from biographies and perpetuating the original misconceptions.

Thus Burns has been unfortunate in his first biographers. We don’t go round saying Dylan Thomas was a drunk who wrote poetry. We don’t mock R.L.S. as a customer of Edinburgh whores who also wrote novels. The early attitude to Burns created the Calvinistic climate of belief that his way of life somehow sullied his writings. For too long the study of Burns was regarded as less worthwhile than the cosmology of Milton or the imagery of Keats. Serious scholars shied away from Burns as a subject not worthy of their attention and labours.

In another way Burns’s place in literature suffered to a large extent because of what you will readily recognise as the Harry Lauder syndrome. The more Burns grew in popularity with the people in Scot-

land, the more he became a symbol for the nation. Now, Scotland is a country which has a more distinctive image than perhaps any other country in the world. So Burns the icon became festooned with the trappings of that image - the thistle, the plough, the glen, the wee cottage, all the uncontrolled hedrum hodrum. Serious scholarship was put off by this Loch Ness monster kind of nonsense.

It is only now in the latter part of this century as witness the international conference on Burns two weeks ago at Strathclyde University that Burns scholars have corrected the distorted picture of Burns and have achieved thro' careful research not only a saner and more balanced account of his life, but also a proper emphasis on the unrivalled value of his verse and his songs -

“We twa hae paidled in the burn
Frae morning sun till dine,
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin auld lang syne.”

We even have a current debate among scholars about the canon of Burns's work and “The Ghost of Bruce” is back to haunt them. Whatever Burns means to you personally, whatever standards by which you judge his life and his work, he has to be seen as an early Romantic poet against the background of the Golden Age of Scotland, the man who took the Edinburgh Establishment by storm, who impressed the ablest of the day with his quick mind and depth of knowledge. And, we should add, common sense, as when Mrs. Cockburn wrote describing his adoption by society - “The man will be spoiled, if he can spoil; but he keeps his simple manners”. The picture, then, that we have of Burns's time in Edinburgh is of a man who went his own way, who kept his head amid all the adulation, who had the strength of character and the insight to acknowledge that his lot was to sing a sang for Scotland.

It would be easy to end my tribute to Burns tonight by echoing the kind of uncritical fervour which you've all heard at some time or another, but I dare be known to think that the members of this club and the guests we like to invite here will not be taken in by that kind of wha's-like-us climax.

Why is it that we revere Burns? The poet, Edwin Muir, got it right - the world-wide appeal of this man of the people is because of the complexity of Burns. He is allusive enough for the erudite and direct

enough for the ordinary reader. He is moral enough for the pious, yet profligate enough for the bon viveur. He is satirical enough for the witty, but sentimental enough for the emotional. He is patriotic enough for the loyalist and egalitarian enough for the democratic. And so it goes on. His works provide a rich field for discussion - just as the contradictions of his life provide a fascinating source of study. As Arnold Bennet, the novelist and critic, summed it up - "The spectacle of his career makes English poets seem only half alive. Matthew Arnold, for example, was a great poet, but in the master-enterprise of being alive, he was a timid grey amateur compared to Burns."

In Shakespeare we grapple with the profundities of the human condition and in Burns we identify ourselves with the verities of life, the hardships, the struggles and those beliefs by which Burns himself lived out his short life - liberty, equality, fraternity.

That poet of nature, William Wordsworth, so admired Burns that in 1803 on his visit to Scotland he went to the grave of Burns and he recorded the occasion in a poem in one of the last verses of which he says of Burns -

‘I mourned with thousands, but as one
More deeply grieved, for he was gone
Whose light I hailed when first it shone,
And showed my youth
How verse may build a princely throne
On humble truth.’

Gentlemen, will you now stand with me in a toast to our prince of truth; who even now after 200 years is still alive and among us.
Croupier David, and gentlemen, to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns