

PAISLEY BURNS CLUB

Annual Dinner

24 January 2015

Members and Guests of Paisley Burns Club,

It is my special honour and privilege as President of this, the world's oldest properly constituted and minuted Burns Club, to propose this toast to 'The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns'. But I do this not for the first time! For – as members of the Club know, though guests may not – it is the President's duty at the start of each of the Club's monthly meetings throughout the year to propose this same toast. So the words of the toast are familiar enough - month after month, and indeed year upon year. And not just here in Paisley Burns Club, but in a global context. So familiar indeed that the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, that most definitive of English language dictionaries, associates both the words 'immortal' and 'memory' *explicitly* with this toast to the Scottish poet Robert Burns. No other poet's memory is regularly honoured by such a toast. But note that – 'no other poet's *memory* . . .' 'no other poet's **MEMORY**'.

As I have pondered over the last twelve months how I might respond to this daunting challenge and shape this toast, I have become increasingly obsessed by these words – 'the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns' – to such an extent that I began to doubt the semantic legitimacy of the phrase. Why the immortal *memory*? Why not the immortal *Burns*? Of course, I am being pedantic, or pernicketic, playing with words a little - but not I think without cause or relevance. After all, does not this elevation of the *memory*, i.e. of all the accumulated cultural baggage that has been loaded onto Burns since his death more than two centuries ago, does not this have its perils? There is a danger, is there not, that we celebrate the *cult* rather than the man and his poetry? Oh - our observances may be honourable and religiously performed – we read the sacred texts, we share this annual prandial communion, we may even exalt Burns as the saviour of Scottish culture. But carried to excess, whether pompously moralizing or riotously Bacchanalian, the cult often traduces the man and his work. Hugh MacDermid, many would say the greatest Scottish poet since Burns, puts it best –

*'A' they've to say was aften said afore  
A lad was born in Kyle to blaw aboot,  
What unco fate mak's him the dumpin'-grun'  
For a' the sloppy rubbish they jaw oot?'*

At the risk of adding to this '*sloppy rubbish*' – and perhaps antagonizing the traditionalists among you – I want to argue, not that Burns's *immortality* is in question – far from it - but that the so-familiar words of this toast need rearranging. And this is not some quirky fixation of mine but in fact an assertion that can be justified not only on logical principle but, as we shall see, by the most respectable precedent.

When precisely, you might well ask, was the toast to 'The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns' first instituted? I would like to be able to answer that question, but I regret to say my researches have not come up with a definitive date or place.

So far as I can determine the first anniversary gathering of friends of Burns, met to honour the poet and his work, took place in 1801 in Alloway in the cottage where Burns had been born. There are no proper records of this event but we do know that nine acquaintances of the poet met for dinner. The host or chairman for the evening was the Rev. Hamilton Paul, a 'New Licht' preacher and editor of the *Ayr Advertiser*. Appropriately enough for a celebration of Burns, the evening seems to have followed the pattern of a Masonic lodge ceremonial; there were recitations, singing, haggis and a toast (in rhyme) was drunk to Burns. What the wording of that toast was we do not know.

The anniversary dinner was repeated the following year and in succeeding years and soon there were comparable small gatherings of Burns devotees in Greenock, Paisley, Irvine, Kilmarnock and Dumfries until, in 1815, Sir Walter Scott was responsible for convening the first of '*the big literary Burns Suppers*'. By then the phrase '*Immortal Memory*' seems to have been well established.

Members of Paisley Burns Club will not be surprised to learn that, according to the *Burns Chronicle*, '*the first documented "Immortal Memory" toast in the world*' was that given at the first meeting of 'The Burns Anniversary Society', in effect the first meeting of this very Club, in January 1805. The event was held in the Star Inn. There were almost seventy present. The proceedings were recorded by the Secretary, the poet Robert Tannahill, described as '*a leading spirit at the opening celebration*' and of whom more later this evening. The address was delivered by the President of the Society, also a poet, William McLaren. McLaren concluded his speech by saying –

*'Gentleman, I certainly consider this the proudest moment of my life, happy in having it in my power, by your choice, to toast, in so respectable a company, THE MEMORY OF OUR IMMORTAL BARD, ROBERT BURNS'*.

But note! The toast is, of course, to the memory of Burns, for Burns was dead, but there is no adulation, no personification, no immortalization of the memory. Rather this, the first documented toast, was addressed not to the '*Immortal Memory*' but to the '*Immortal Bard*'! What better precedent could we have than that of our own first President?

So the toast is not to an accumulated curate's egg *memory*, but to the immortal Bard himself, the immortal Robert Burns, the man and his work.

But yet - while we may, I trust, acknowledge and accept this clarification from such an impeccable source, while we may agree to detach the word 'immortal' from the word

'memory' and ascribe it instead to Burns himself and his poetry and songs - the very word '*immortal*' still seems to me to merit some closer attention. Burns, in fact, uses this word '*immortal*' on a number of occasions, applying it, for example, and not surprisingly perhaps, to those people he held most dear. For instance, in his *Epistle to Davie*, he speaks of his 'darling Jean', Jean Armour, in these warmest of terms –

*'It warms me, it charms me  
To mention but her name;  
It heats me, it beets me,  
And sets me a' on flame!*

. . .

*The life-blood streaming thro' my heart,  
. . . my more dear Immortal part.'*

So, too, immortality features in his *Epitaph: on Robert Fergusson*, the poet to whom he was perhaps most indebted and whom he regarded as his '*elder brother in the muses*'. Expressing his admiration for Fergusson's work on the simple tombstone which he, Burns, had caused to be erected in the Canongate churchyard in Edinburgh, Burns wrote

*'This humble tribute with a tear he gives  
A brother Bard, he can no more bestow:  
But dear to fame thy Song immortal lives,  
A nobler monument than Art can show.'*

And again, in a poem addressed *To Miss Graham of Fintry*, the word recurs, this time in the personification of poetry itself, where Burns speaks of 'the Scottish Muse *immortal*'.

*Immortal* Jean, *immortal* Fergusson, and, most significantly, the *immortal* Scottish Muse of poetry. Why not then *immortal* Robert Burns? It is impossible, I think, to avoid the question - did Burns himself crave such immortality? And if so, whose critical appraisal would he have desired and respected?

It is clear enough from a number of his poems and more explicitly from his letters that, despite his low social station, his recurring self-doubt and the set-backs of his difficult life, Burns's overriding desire was to win recognition as a poet, first in the local context of Ayrshire but ultimately at the national level, as he put it in one of his epistolary verses, as '*the bard to Scotia leal*'. In November 1786, just over six months after the publication of the Kilmarnock Edition, in a scurrilous text, Burns spoke of himself as

*'We, Robert Burns, by virtue of a warrant from Nature, bearing date 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1759, Poet-Laureate and Bard-in-Chief in and over the districts and countries of Kyle, Cunningham, and Carrick . . .'* etc., etc.

Of course, this was all tongue-in-cheek, somewhat self-mocking and not meant to be taken seriously. And yet it did reveal Burns's real ambition.

To be sure, he was not pretentious, he did not suffer from hubris. In January 1787, in the first of many letters written to Dr John Moore, a fervent admirer of the Kilmarnock Edition poems, Burns admitted that *'The hope to be admired for ages [i.e. the hope of immortality] is, in by far the greater part of those even who are authors of repute, an unsubstantial dream.'* He claimed to dismiss such *'Utopian thoughts'*. *'I am not vain enough,'* he wrote, *'to hope for distinguished poetic fame'*. But this was disingenuous. In fact, he did entertain such thoughts and he would continue to do so. Again, to Dr Moore in February 1787 –

*'I scorn the affectation of seeming modesty to cover self-conceit. That I have some merit I do not deny . . .'*

And to the Earl of Eglinton in January 1787 –

*'There is scarce anything to which I am so feelingly alive as the honour and welfare of my country; and as a poet, I have no higher enjoyment than singing her sons and daughters.'*

And to Mrs Dunlop, a life-long friend and frequent correspondent, he was even more unequivocal and explicit –

*'The appellation of a Scottish bard is by far my highest pride; to continue to deserve it is my most exalted ambition.'*

This 'ambition' Burns had already articulated in verse in his poem *The Vision* which appeared in the Kilmarnock Edition in 1786. As many here will, of course, know, it is a poem in two parts – Duan First and Duan Second; the word 'duan' taken from the then recently 'discovered' poems of the ancient Celtic bard Ossian, a poet Burns much admired and upon whom *'I endeavoured to form my conduct'*. I guess this declaration betrayed Burns' desire to emulate Ossian not in terms of style but rather in terms of Ossian's status as a putative national bard. But to return to *The Vision* -

The poem is set in the poet's *'auld clay biggin'*. Exhausted after a hard winter's day in the fields, Burns is seated by the fire in a mood of melancholy introspection and self doubt –

*'All in this mottie, misty clime,  
I backward mus'd on wasted time:  
How I had spent my youthfu' prime,  
An' done naething,  
But stringing blethers up in rhyme,  
For fools to sing.'*

Disillusioned and depressed, he is on the point of renouncing all his poetic aspirations when the door clicks open and into the cottage comes 'A tight, outlandish Hizzie, braw'. Who is this attractive stranger? 'I took her for some SCOTTISH MUSE', the poet writes. And this was indeed a manifestation of that 'Scottish Muse immortal' - and not only that, she bore a striking resemblance to Burns's immortal Jean Armour.

*'Down flow'd her robe, a tartan sheen,  
Till half a leg was scrimply seen;  
And such a leg! My bonie JEAN  
    Could only peer it;  
Sae straight, sae taper, tight an' clean  
    Nane else came near it.'*

In the second part of the poem, Burns's muse explains that her name is Coila (Kyle-a) (maybe even Kylie) and that she has come to reassure Burns, the lad born in Kyle, that he has 'a true role' as a poet, that he *will* achieve fame.

*'All hail! My own inspired Bard!  
In me thy native Muse regard!  
Nor longer mourn thy fate is hard,  
    Thus poorly low!  
I come to give thee such reward  
    As we bestow.'*

Finally, in recognition of Burns's genius, she places on his head a wreath of honour – not a laurel wreath but a wreath of holly –

*' "And wear thou this" – she solemn said  
And bound the Holly round my head:  
The polish'd leaves and berries red  
    Did rustling play;  
And, like a passing thought, she fled  
    In light away.'*

It is clear then, from his verse and from his correspondence, that Burns had ambitions to be recognized as a national poet, that he did crave 'the appellation of a Scottish bard' and, no doubt also, the assurance, or at any rate the likelihood, of immortality that went with such an honour. But whose recognition? Whose acclaim did he seek? I think he had two audiences in mind. His poetic reputation and fame were *first* abroad in his native Ayrshire but *then*, following the publication of the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh Editions, he became the talk of the capital, the brief darling of the Edinburgh *literati*. In other words, Burns's readers, the audience he desired, came from both ends of the social spectrum.

There were his Ayrshire friends, his cronies, the ‘*hairum-scairum, ram-stam boys*’, and not least, I imagine, his lovers, so many of whom had been immortalized in his verse. As he himself wrote to Dr Moore –

*‘For my part, my first ambition was, and still my strongest wish is, to please my compeers, the rustic inmates of the hamlet . . .’*

But his muse demanded more than this merely local recognition. Burns needed the admiring acknowledgment of the Edinburgh establishment, the cultural elite, the country’s arbiters of literary taste, above all perhaps the praise of his fellow poets. In a letter written in January 1789 to Dugald Stewart, Professor of Moral Philosophy in Edinburgh, he wrote

*‘to the distinguished champions of genius and learning I shall be ever ambitious of being known’.*

So Burns looked for recognition from both ‘*the rustic inmates of the hamlet*’ and the ‘*champions of genius and learning*’ – or, to put it in simpler alliterative terms, Burns’s ambition was to be *both* the People’s Poet *and* the Poets’ Poet. Did he get his wish? Of course, he did. To some extent he experienced this acclaim during his own lifetime – though never so comprehensively nor so permanently in either context – local or national – as to dispel his own diffidence, self-doubt and sometimes even despair. But *post mortem*, almost immediately, and consistently for more than two hundred years, his muse has granted him the *immortality* he surely craved.

Within a year or two of his death Burns had become the people’s bard. First in Ayrshire and Renfrewshire but soon, up and down the entire country, ‘inmates’ of the hamlets, towns and cities, ordinary men and women, met to listen to his poetry, sing his songs and drink a toast in his honour. And so the commemoration and celebration has continued and spread across the globe (even now – give or take a few hours - a member of this famous Club is proposing this same toast in New York!).

But within a few years of his death Burns had also become the Poets’ Poet, recognized as a forerunner of the Romantic Movement. Wordsworth thought his poetry ‘*imperishable*’, rated him second only to Chaucer as a poet of what he called the ‘*natural and sensual school*’, and in 1803 with his sister Dorothy made a pilgrimage to Dumfries and Alloway. Coleridge published a poem entitled *Burns* to raise money for the family of, as he put it, ‘*Nature’s own beloved bard*’. Keats too was a devotee; travelling north, he wrote a sonnet honouring Burns on a visit to Dumfries and then another in Alloway. Shelley admired Burns’s egalitarianism and ‘*liberal values*’ and, in one of his longer poems, he refers, albeit briefly, to Burns, ‘*a Scottish peasant boy*’, as a model for anyone writing poetry about Nature. But it is Byron, patrician rather than peasant, but still a fellow Scot (at least in part), whose admiration and evaluation is perhaps the most perceptive of Burns’s poetic peers. It is not simply that for him, Byron, ‘*the rank of Burns is the very first of his art*’. Glowing as this tribute is, Byron’s assessment is much

more specific and gets to the contradictory essence of Burns's genius. In December 1813 he recorded in his journal that a friend had lent him a number of Burns's 'unpublished, and never-to-be-published, Letters'. Byron read them and wrote –

*'They are full of oaths and obscene songs. What an antithetical mind! – tenderness, roughness – delicacy, coarseness – sentiment, sensuality – soaring and groveling, dirt and deity – all mixed up in one compound of inspired clay.'*

And elsewhere in Byron's diary

*'Read Burns today. What would he have been if a patrician? We should have had more polish – less force – just as much verse, but no immortality.'*

Throughout this address this evening I have, as you may well have observed, consistently avoided eliciting and describing those qualities in Burns's life and work which justify this so-familiar accolade of immortality. Why? Partly because these qualities are surely self-evident - here we are riding on the crest of a wave of more than two hundred years of Burns Suppers and Immortal Memories; there is surely no-one present this evening who could not advance his own preferred explanation for Burns's fame. But if this is so, perhaps I ought to offer you mine.

For me, it is the expression in Burns's life and work of an honest humanity that matters – his recognition and celebration of the fact that we are creatures of flesh and blood who labour and love, whose lives embrace, as Byron saw, 'tenderness, roughness – delicacy, coarseness – sentiment, sensuality', creatures whose passions may, too often, in Shelley's memorable metaphor, 'stain the white radiance of eternity'.

Yet perversely and paradoxically, it is Burns's acknowledgment and poetic sanctification of this palpable mortality which has secured his *immortality*. Because we readily recognize ourselves in his work - the good and the bad, the love and the lust, the hopes and the fears - because we see in the poems and songs the experiences of our mortality raised to the level of art in a language which we can (or perhaps we should say 'we once could') understand, for all these reasons we accord Burns his unique immortality. So let us once more celebrate this. Gentlemen, I ask you to stand with me.

I can do no better than echo the words of this Club's very first President –

Gentlemen, I am more than '*happy in having it in my power, by your choice, to toast, in so respectable a company, the Memory of our Immortal Bard, Robert Burns*'.

Frank A Walker

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