

Mr Croupier, honoured guests and fellow members of Paisley Burns Club...

Like Holy Willie, “Confess I must” - but not that “at times I’m fashed wi’ fleshly lust” - at least, this is neither the time nor the place for that kind of confession. What I do confess is this: unlike the painstakingly crafted orations of most of my worthy predecessors, this present Toast has not been long in preparation. I must further confess that I was strongly tempted by an opportunity which would not have arisen for someone earlier prepared, namely the opportunity to pinch liberally from James Mackay’s splendid Biography of Burns published only a few weeks ago - I reckoned that, between the fact that it was so recently available and the fact that it runs to well over 700 pages, not many of you would have read it from cover to cover and, accordingly, there was only a slight chance that I would be heckled by you for plagiarism - but I decided not to succumb to this temptation. Mind you, if you haven’t yet read your Mackay, you’ll have no way of knowing if I’m telling the truth!

I will, however, make further mention of Mackay’s book in this respect, that it is further evidence - if evidence were needed - that, as we approach the bi-centenary of Burns’s death, he and his works continue to fascinate: Burns Suppers are more popular than ever (and, as far as my own experience is concerned, these events are, if anything, increasingly marked by a proper appreciation of their subject); and, more importantly, the continuing output of written material on Burns is quite staggering, both in quality and quantity.

As he lay dying in July 1796 Burns is supposed to have turned to his wife and said: “Jean, I’ll be more thought of a hundred years after this than I am now.” When putting the finishing touches to the revised Chambers Edition of Burns’s works in 1896, William Wallace observed that Burns’s dying prediction had come true and went on to say: “It is safe to say that a hundred years hence he will be more thought of still. By that time the patronising Philistine, and the bourgeois critic, and the malignant detractor

with his croak and leer, will have vanished into congenial obscurity. Burns will be able to speak for himself.” This prediction has also come true, thanks to the scholarship of the past few decades, by people like James Mackay and our own, now sadly departed, Clark Hunter, whose collection of letters entitled “Let Burns Speak” echoed and fulfilled those words which I have just quoted.

This ever-growing interest in Burns is not, of course, restricted to the English-speaking world. His works have been translated into almost 50 languages. As well as the more obvious ones like French, German, Flemish and other western European languages, there are some more surprising ones, such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Hebrew, Albanian, Faroese and even Esperanto. It is well known, of course, that some of the finest critical appraisals of Burns have come from non-English writers like Auguste Angellier and Hans Hecht.

There is some justice in this, in that Burns himself was not only interested in Scots and English literature but also had what one could call a good working knowledge of French, sufficient it would seem to enable him, even by the early age of 13, to read, understand and enjoy the likes of Moliere - and, although there is no hard evidence that he could read and understand German, we do know that he was greatly interested by the writings of Goethe (albeit perhaps in English translation), for he mentions his reading of Goethe in one of his letters to Mrs McLehose.

And yet one cannot help being surprised, at least, at first, that Burns’s works, originally written for a very small “market” here in Scotland should have become so universally popular~ particularly when there has been such a substantial language barrier to be got over. After all, we are not just talking about the translation of English into a foreign language, but rather translating from a Scottish dialect which the English themselves - and, let’s be honest, many of us Scots - have to struggle with.

It is certainly desirable that the effort should be made to translate great works of literature. Great minds are the common property of

all nations. When the works of these great minds take the form of music or art, they are, fortunately, immediately accessible to all nations without the need of translation. When great minds express themselves in literature, it would be most unjust - and the world would be the poorer - if a way could not be found to make these words and thoughts just as available for all mankind as the works of art and music.

Yes, it's desirable, but is it possible? We've all heard the saying, about foreign jokes which fall flat, "Ah, yes, of course, it has lost something in the translation." Dante said the same thing centuries ago: "No work bound together by the muse can be transferred from its own language to another without losing its sweetness and euphony." Matthew Arnold, in similar vein, said: "The verse of the Greek poets no translation can adequately produce." This is further backed up by the well-known pithy Italian saying: "I traditori, traduttori." - which being translated is "translators are traitors." On the other hand, in his "Essay on Books", Emerson said: "I do not hesitate to read all good books in translations. I should as soon think of swimming across Charles River when I wish to go to Boston as of reading all my books in originals when I have them rendered for me in my mother tongue." One assumes that, when writing that, Emerson meant that even the difficult Scots dialect in which much of Burns's poetry is rendered was worth translating and capable of being translated, for we know that Emerson was familiar with - indeed, a great admirer of - Burns' works and, although he himself obviously read and enjoyed the originals, he ranked Burns as a literary giant with universal appeal - which could not have been the case without the availability of translations. Just to show Emerson's evaluation of Burns, I quote from the speech which he gave at a Centenary Burns Dinner in Boston on 25th January 1859: "Neither Latimer nor Luther struck more telling blows against false theology than did this brave singer. The Confession of Augsburg, the Declaration of Independence, the French Rights of Man and the Marseillaise are not more weighty documents in the history of freedom than the songs of Burns. His satire has lost none of its edge. His musical arrows yet sing through the air. Emerson ranks Burns with Shakespeare, Rabelais and Cervantes. (Mind you, the worth of this opinion is called in question - in my mind, at least - by the fact that Emerson goes on to say that he would put Thomas Carlyle in the same category! This is an evaluation which does not appear to have stood the test of time:

those of us who went on the Summer outing last year to Ecclefechan were left with the impression that Carlyle was worthy, but rather a bore.)

With acclaim of the kind heaped by Emerson on Burns's works, it's hardly surprising that they should be in demand the world over - and, indeed, as we have already seen, there is an amazing number of languages into which these works have been translated. The question, therefore, is not "Should translations be made?". The question is "How successful or effective are translations? Do they do him justice?"

Maurice Lindsay has spoken of the "virtual impossibility of translating the colloquial speed and texture of Burns's Scots satires

Often the content seems thin or so different from the original as hardly to reflect the spirit of Burns at all."

Clearly it would take longer than the short time at my disposal this evening to assess all the translations that have been done in all these 50 or so languages, but I thought that we could usefully spend some time looking at the experience of just one foreign country. Its identity is ever so slightly hinted at in one of the quotations on the Toast List! It is, of course, well known that Burns is popular in Russia. In his autobiography, John Cairney tells of an amusing incident, during his visit to Moscow in 1977, which demonstrates how instantly recognisable, and respected, is Burns's name in Russia. For the benefit of the Scottish newspapers, the photographer travelling with Cairney's party insisted that Cairney, dressed for his part as Burns and accompanied by Pipe Sgt. Major Jimmy McCallum, wearing his kilt and full ceremonial gear, should pose for photographs very early one morning in Red Square, with the Kremlin wall and St Basil's Cathedral in the background. Not surprisingly, a crowd gathered round and, before long, a platoon of Red Army soldiers were goose-stepping their way towards Cairney and company. The photographer was not having much success in explaining what was going on to the Officer in Charge, but then Cairney stepped forward, pointed to

his costume and said very deliberately “Robert Burns”, whereupon the Officer smiled, saluted and marched his men away.

Incidentally, later on, when Cairney is describing how he earned the respect of the company at a Burns Supper in Moscow by reciting a Pushkin sonnet in Russian, he paid tribute to the help he had been given by Professor Peter Henry of the Department of Slavonic Studies at Glasgow University, who had written the sonnet out in a kind of phonetic non-Cyrillic script. Coincidentally, it was that same Professor Peter Henry who kindly supplied me with a considerable amount of source material for this speech. Indeed, he had accepted my invitation to be one of my guests here this evening, but, regrettably, his travel arrangements have prevented him from being here. Further evidence of the popularity of Burns in Russia is provided, for example, by this small bi-lingual book lent to me by Peter Henry. It is entitled “The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns” and was produced in 1964 by the Robert Burns and Alexander Pushkin Friendship Club. It is a goldmine of critical essays on Burns by various Soviet students. I found the list of honorary members rather interesting (Remember this was in 1964): the Honorary President was Samuil Marshak, the well-known poet and Burns translator (who had, of course, also, since the bi-centenary in 1959, been the Honorary President of the Burns Federation in Scotland); other honorary members of the Burns-Pushkin Friendship Club were Bertrand Russell, John Steinbeck, Dmitri Shostakovich, the Scottish composers, Cedric Thorpe Davie and Ronald Stevenson, numerous teachers and academics here and in Russia, an amazing number of Scottish Railway workers (!), Willie Gallacher, Jimmy Reid, Emrys Hughes, M.P., Hugh MacDiarmid, Kenneth McKellar, Tom Fleming, John Laurie and - even nearer home - Clark Hunter.

Before we consider how satisfactory are the translations into Russian, I think we should try first of all to establish the reason or reasons for Burns’s popularity there. I think that there has tended to be an assumption, here, that it is only because the Soviet system perceived and exploited a strain of Socialism in Burns’s works. It’s not surprising that this assumption should be made, because, after all, with, perhaps, only one or two exceptions, none of us here this evening was around prior to the 1917 Revolution and so we haven’t known anything other than a Communist Russia. Indeed, many of us, like myself, are post-war babies and were able to identify with President Bill Clinton when he said at his inauguration last Wednesday that he was part of a generation

raised in the shadows of the Cold War. As a result, most of us have

been conditioned throughout our lives into thinking of Russia or the Soviet Union (we used to use the names interchangeably) as a place which had always been Communist - and, to make matters worse, a kind of no-go area, a place which you didn't visit unless you were some kind of "Commy".

If these assumptions were all correct, there would appear to be danger that, after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the apparent downfall of Communism, Burns' reputation there might go into a decline.

Any such fear was, for me, quickly dispelled by a recent incident. A few weeks ago, I found myself in the company of three Russians who were over here on a trade mission. Two of them, Nikolai and Helena, were company bosses and the third, Natasha, was an interpreter, because Helena and Nikolai could not speak English. I have to qualify that, however, because, after some time, during a lull in the conversation, Nikolai suddenly stood up and uttered what was obviously a party piece - the one sentence of English which he could speak: "Robert Burns like the common man." I found this doubly significant - firstly, that he should choose to make Burns the subject of the one sentence of English which, apparently, he could speak; and secondly, Nicolai was clearly one of the new breed of free-market entrepreneurs in Russia and was very far from being a Communist. I took this as a clear indication that the Russians' love of Burns is much more deeply rooted than, and has an existence quite independent from, Communist ideology.

This becomes better understood if we look briefly at the history of the development of Russian interest in Burns. It goes back long before revolutionary times. Donald Low, in his otherwise excellent book in the Critical Heritage series, actually got it wrong when he said that the first translations of Burns into Russian dated from 1875: believe it or not, the first Russian translation of a Burns poem appeared as early as 1800, a mere 4 years after his death.

Admittedly this was the Address to the Shade of Thomson and it did not give a particularly representative impression of Burns' work. We had to wait until the 1820s for the appearance of further translations: *The Cotter's Saturday Night* and *To A Mountain Daisy*, both translated by the Russian poet, Ivan Kozlov. Also in the 1820s appeared the first critical essays on Burns by Russian

writers. As the 19th century progressed, numerous Russian writers and poets took note of Burns, translated his works and were influenced by him. It has to be admitted, however, that, for most of the 19th century, this interest in Burns was confined to the "Literati". It was only with the advent of Soviet times that interest in Burns was extended to what one might call the man in the street, who felt a deep affinity with the democratic and freedom-loving content of much of Burns's poetry. However, it is clear not only from my wee story about Nikolai, but also from my recent conversations with Peter Henry and from what I have read even in such pre-glasnost publications as this Burns-Pushkin Friendship Club book and older issues of the *Scottish Slavonic Review* (a twice-yearly publication edited, incidentally, by Peter Henry) that Russian appreciation of Burns, no longer confined to the "Literati", is based equally on his love of nature, his profound understanding of human emotions and not least the lyrical and musical qualities of so much of his work. It seems clear, therefore, that, whether Russia and the other former Soviet Republics continue with Glasnost and Perestroika or revert back to Communism, either way Burns's immense reputation there is sure to continue undiminished.

As to whether the numerous Russian translations are faithful to the original, it has to be said that some are more successful than others. Most of the credit for increasing Russian awareness of Burns's works in the 20th century must go to Samuil Marshak (who died in 1964, in fact just after the Burns-Pushkin Friendship Club book was published), because he translated over 200 poems, including no less a work that Tam O'Shanter~ but, while he was, in himself, a gifted and versatile poet, his achievement in translating Burns consists more in the quantity, than the quality, of his

translations. He was primarily concerned to preserve the rhythm, tone and melody of the original and in this he generally succeeded, but he took extraordinary liberties with the texts and some of his chosen words are laughably inadequate. For example, “there’s threesome reels, there’s foursome reels, there’s hornpipes and strathspeys, man,” is given lamely as “we have various dances, in the mountains of my homeland.” In his translation of *To a Haggis*, Marshak does much to convey the exuberance of Burns’s language, but he fails rather drastically with lines like “Auld Scotland wants

nae skinking ware that jaups in luggies,” which becomes: “Don’t give us an insipid broth, be merciful to us . . .”. To be fair to Marshak, however, he has obviously succeeded to a very large degree, otherwise Burns would be more an object of fun, rather than a hero, in Russia. The main objection to Marshak’s versions is that he tries to clean everything up, making the words more genteel than Burns intended. As Peter Henry has commented, Marshak is a wee bit of a prude. There are other Russian translators who, though not as prolific as Marshak, have been more successful at capturing the coothiness of Burns’s language - for example, Viktor Fedotov and Sergei Petrov and worth a special mention is the recently deceased Byelorussian translator, Yazep Semyazhon, who had the advantage that the Byelorussian language is to the actual Russian language as Lowland Scots is to English.

Mention of Byelorussia prompts me to point out in the passing that Russia itself is not the only former Soviet Republic enthusiastic about Burns: his works have also been translated into Byelorussian (as mentioned), Moldavian, Lithuanian, Estonian and probably several more of the host of languages in the former USSR.

I would like to conclude by reading the lines written by Samuil Marshak about Burns during the bi-centenary celebrations in 1959. Obviously, this was still during the time of the Soviet Union, but they are still, today, an appropriate indication of the esteem in which Burns is held in Russia and the neighbouring republics. The

lines are those printed on the Toast List, but I am not going to attempt to read them in Russian.

*“To us - your friends as well -
Your barefoot muse is dear
She has walked through all the lands
of the Soviet Union.
We remember you
Amidst the banquet’s merry noise.
And we’re beside you in the struggle
for peace and the happiness of the world”*

These words, of course, echo Burns’s statement in “A Man’s a Man for A’ That”, and, although we are all well aware that Burns’s poetry contains much else besides, it is fitting that, in these troubled times, when the world is still far from being a peaceful place, we should concentrate on Burns’s advocacy of the brotherhood of man. That entitles him to the Immortality of his Memory, which I now ask you to join with me in toasting.