

Paisley Burns Club

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IMMORTAL MEMORY

By

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'Immortal Memory'

In 1988, the television channel NBC, asked song writer Albert Hammond to compose a song to be used at the start of their programmes, covering the Seoul Olympic games to be held in South Korea in 1988.

He wrote a song with these lyrics;

I want one moment in time,
When I'm more than I thought I could be,
When all of my dreams are but a heartbeat away,
And the answers are all up to me,
Give me one moment in time,
When I'm racing with destiny,
Then in that one moment of time,
I will feel, I will feel eternity.

Gentlemen, this is my moment in time in the life and history of the Paisley Burns Club, and now as destiny dictates, the answers are up to me.

Robert Burns, had his moment in time, that is why we are here this evening, and throughout the World, people of all nations are recalling the moment in time, when an Ayrshire ploughman rose from the humblest of backgrounds to be one of the most famous Scots of all time, leaving behind him a legacy of poems and songs that have stood the test of time.

To me, his upbringing is a big part of the reason why he became the man he was, it was because of the example set by his father of how to live his life.

It was certainly his Fathers determination to make sure his children received the best possible education which provided Robert Burns with the intellectual background that enabled him to develop into the major poet and letter-writer he did, in fact, become.

No doubt he also got his proud independence of spirit from his father.

I often wonder, if like me, Robert Burns ever stood at the grave of his Father and spoke to him in the silence of his own mind, thinking thoughts like; "I know you worried about me Father, but you didn't really need to. I became a famous songwriter and poet, in fact, one of my finest poems was due to you being buried here, 'Tam O' Shanter'.

One of my other poems Father, I based on our family life, I called it, 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'. It captures the very essence of rural life as I remember it, thanks Father and Mother for the memories.

Robert Burns, wrote of his Father describing him as, “the best of friends and the ablest instructors”

One of my guests this evening is Charles Roger whom I met in Arundel Sussex, his parents came from Mauchline, and it is my pleasure every year in December to take him to the graveyard where they are buried, I leave him for a few moments, as he speaks to his parents.

I'm sure there are many in this hall, who have paid similar homage to their Parents, thanking them for their moment in time.

So? how do you pay tribute to this man, the son of an Ayrshire farmer, who rose to be one of Scotland's most famous sons?

Though I find it difficult to decide from which stand point to approach it, I feel that in this cosmopolitan assembly, I must speak firstly of Burns the poet; secondly, of Burns the man; and thirdly, of Burns the lover.

Robert Burns was a genius, and the hallmarks of genius are the elements of universality and the qualities of eternity. Burns considered the great essentials of his day and generation to be the constant upholding of the dignity of man, and the persistent belief in almighty God.

On the dignity of man Burns never wavered from the conviction that all men, poor or outcast, gentle or simple, were the Creator’s heirs. He had a great message for his time and for all time. his glorious vision was one of love, creative all pervading, unending and undying.

That he failed fully to grasp, obey, and follow perfect love that must ultimately rule and guide all things, brings him nearer our frailties and weaknesses, and in us a great sympathy and fellow feeling, for, though his particular weaknesses may not have been ours, each heart knows it’s own secret weakness.

as he said: - “A fellow feeling mak’s us wondrous kind”

His life has influenced his message, his own life gives a very rigid estimate of his own failures, for, remember this, Robert Burns was an unsparing critic, comparing himself with the vision of love and perfection he saw before him, scorning to excuse himself by the standards of the time.

There is ample evidence to prove that he was a conscientious workman, who never indulged in excess by himself, but only yielded under strong pressure of company. His self-knowledge included his failures, he saw God with the eyes of an ordinary man, not as a saint.

In his “epistle to James Smith”, he sums up his self-examination thus.

**With steady aim some fortune chase,
Keen hope does every sinew brace,
Thro’ fair, thro’ foul, they urge the race,
an seize the prey;**

And others, like your humble servant,
Poor wights, nae rules or roads observin',
To right or left eternal swervin',
they zigzag on;
Till, curst with age, obscure and starvin',
they aften groan.

Burns had that rare courage to be, to think, to live and express himself. He was not a conventional copy of anyone, his study of himself was remarkable.

Hypocrisy and cant he could not endure, but his vision of eternal truths no human counterfeit could dim.

In his epistle to a young friend, his counsel and advice are noteworthy.

When ranting round in pleasure's ring,
religion may be blinded;
Or if she gie a random sting,
it may be little minded;
But when on life we're tempest driv'n
a conscience but a canker,
A correspondence fixed wi' heaven,
is sure a noble anchor?

Robert Burns had that queer mixture that endears him to our hearts, the mixture of pathos and humour. He shows us natural life, as he knew it, saw it, felt it, lived it, sincere, conventional and imperishable.

Pictures of hardy natural men and women as he saw them; sometimes comic, sometimes earnest, but always lifelike, vigorous, and revealing. He possessed a sympathetic understanding of his neighbours.

A clergyman, writing to Burns said; "One lesson of virtue and morality delivered in your amusing style, and from such as you, will operate more than dozens would from such as me."

Could this Godly Clergyman, have foretold the future, he might have said thousands, even millions.

Something of his humour is to be seen in his writings and poems.

One may suffice at the moment; don't we get a wholesome laugh with no bitterness in "Sic a Wife as Willie had"?

She had a e'e, she had but ane,
The cat has twa the very colour;
Five rusty teeth, forbye a stump,
A clapper tongue wad deave a Miller;
A whisken beard about her mou'
Her nose and chin, they threaten tither;
Sic a wife as Willie had,
A wadna gie a button for her.

To Burns, men were ends in themselves, not pawns in a game, to preserve this dignity a faith in the Almighty God was essential.

Combined with this, there were two forces that the Poet stood for and advocated, love and liberty. He loved everything except what was base, treacherous and tyrannous. He loved all creation, even "Auld Nick" himself on occasions, for, the Diel to Burns, was in some respects desirable, being supposed to be capable of taking away undesirables.

Was Robert Burns a good man? I think so, after all goodness consists in positive practice, not in negative restraint. His was a short life, all too short to accomplish what he might have accomplished by the medium of his extraordinary personal ability.

But his works remain alive and go on to finish the unfinished symphony of his life that began in Ayrshire.

He is entitled to be ranked among the greatest in the World, like all true Poets, he sought to clothe his thoughts as perfectly as he could, in music and imagery, as nature has clothed the flowers with beauty and fragrance.

The whole essence of Burns outpourings and through them, his teachings, was that, there has got to be a spiritual regeneration of mankind, to bring us to the time that is surely coming, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, when "Man tae Man the World o'er, shall Brithers be for a' that."

But it is as the lover, that our endearment for Burns rises to it's highest. Robert Burns without love would be like Hamlet without the Prince. His poetry was born in love, of himself he said: "I never had the heart, thought, or inclination of turning Poet till I got once heartily in love, and then rhyme and song, were in a manner, the spontaneous language of my heart."

To read the poems of Robert Burns, particularly those dedicated to the fairer sex, we must give a certain amount of attention to his life story. One would imagine that he was a man of much affection, and of a most changeable nature, especially where women were concerned.

Such, in my opinion, is far from being the case. Fair women, with one or two notable exceptions, were to the Poet as, “The rose upon it’s stalk on a dewy morning,” something to be eulogised, something so beautiful which called forth all the poetic expression of which he was capable of.

Love awakened in the Poet beautiful emotions and noble thoughts, and his love songs are a sufficient claim on our affection, regard, and veneration.

Critics speak of them as the most exquisite love songs of any Country. In their homely Scottish setting, nothing can equal them for tenderness, winsomeness, and naturalness in every variation of mood. They run from melancholy sadness to mad abandon and fun.

They are the offspring of nature expressed in the language of simplicity, breathing sentiments that are inspired by the most tender and exquisite feelings and highest ideals.

He speaks of “Love guarded by all the purity of virtue, and all the pride of honour.”

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever,
Ae fareweel, and then forever .
Deep in heart rung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans, I'll wage thee.

Fare thee weel, thou first and fairest,
Fare thee weel, thou best and dearest
Thou be ilka joy and treasure,
Peace, enjoyment, love and pleasure.

This beautiful song was written during one of the many storms in the Bard’s chequered career when breaking off intimacy with “Clarinda,” previous to his marriage to Jean Armour.

Her ideas stirred his soul, but his duty to Bonnie Jean, to whom he was already secretly married, was plain. Sir Walter Scott said, that this song contains the essence of a thousand loves.

He has been placed among the world’s immortal song writers, because his songs describe the feelings of ordinary individuals, the common joys, sorrows and the life of the common worker of his time.

His love songs, are songs that do not depend wholly on the words, for he placed great importance on the tune, he felt that soul must enter into the song, and this could only be secured by getting the tune to suit his words.

As Alexander Smith wrote, “If we applaud the Roman Emperor who found Rome made of brick and left it made of marble, what shall we say of the man who found the songs of his country indelicate and left them pure, who made wholesome the air, which the spirit and the affection breathe”.

Robert Burns did this; and not only did he purify existing Scottish song, he added to it all that has made it best and rarest.

Once heartily in love, he was never out of it, his fire was kept alive by one flame after another.

His Brother Gilbert said, “Robert constantly the victim of some fair enslaver, sometimes he didn’t wait to be off with one fair charmer, before a second flame inspired and possessed him.

Feminine grace and beauty called forth many of the poet’s finest love songs.

But nothing holds our affection for Burns more than his love of truth and sincerity, his desire to love and be loved. His realisation that the true end is honesty and wholehearted devotion to all that is best in life.

He realised, that there is a Supreme Being above who loves his children and all creation and that the real joys of life are not from outside possessions, but flow spontaneously from the heart of God to the heart of man.

It’s no in title’s nor in rank;
It’s no in wealth in London bank;
to purchase peace and rest;
It’s no in makin muckle mair;
It’s no in books, it’s no in lear;
to mak us truly blest
If happiness hae not her seat,
and centre in her breast,
We may be wise, or rich, or great,
but ne’er can be blest.
Her treasures nor pleasures
could make us happy lang;
The hearts aye the part aye,
that makes us right or wrang.

Robert Burns, was supreme in the qualities of the heart, whose every beat was his own and for others.

Burns also loved nature, even behind the plough he revelled in all the glory and grandeur of it, but strong as his love for nature was, it was always subordinated by his love for mankind.

His descriptions of nature had a background of human figures, mankind is always foremost with the poet, and because of the love he had for mankind.

Take these lines from “The Lass of Ballochmyle.”

Fair is the morn in flow’ry may,
And sweet is night in autumn mild;
When roving through the garden gay,
Or wandering in the lonely wild.

Other poets would probably have stopped there, but not Robert Burns, over the braes he brings a Maiden.

Woman, nature’s darling child;
There all her charms she does compile;
Even there her other works are foiled
By the bonnie lass O’ Ballochmyle.

It is the same with “Mary in Heaven” and “The Banks O’ Doon,” and all others. His landscape is always, not for itself, but for the human feeling with which he links it up. Where the landscape is most lovely, the feeling is most deep.

Burns, you see, in his songs and poems, mingled man with nature, he loved nature, but he loved mankind more.

He saw too, something in humanity that few ever saw; he saw that every man and woman possessed an individual spirit, whose mortal right was liberty and freedom.

The “Declaration of Independence” and the “Marseillaise”, are great expressions of freedom, but there are no more weighty documents in the history of freedom than the songs of Robert Burns.

He wrote with a fervour and insistence, scarcely matched since the supreme revelation of the worth of a man’s soul.

That “A Man’s a Man for a’ that,” meant more than external circumstances or rank, and that ultimately all social conditions must obey this natural equality.

He taught and illustrated how revolution with a song or poem could accomplish more than revolution with a sword.

Such songs and descriptions have done more to break down racial barriers and antipathies, and have kindled a zeal to right the wrong, and give to every man and woman the chance to be a man, a woman.

Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a' that,
That sense and worth, Oe'r all the earth,
Shall bear the gree an' a that.

This verse alone, said one person, is worth twenty battleships for the security of our native land and every country trusting in righteousness.

During the times that Burns lived in, his writings must have inspired the Scots Nation to face up to their hardships and bond with other Nations where poverty was the norm.

Today, we live in a different World, but we share the pride that Burns had in being born a Scot, we share in the fact that his poetry inspired our forefathers to realise that education was the key to a better life and that the written word is indeed a powerful tool.

Robert Burns is not a tradition, his works are a living force that reflects, the rural life of his time and the heart of a great Nation, which we are proud to call home.

If, Robert Burns had been granted a longer span of life, would he? have stood at his Father's graveside and said, "Father, on your death bed, you said you worried about me more than any of your other children, I became famous and all our family, including you, are now known throughout the world, I never forgot my background, and spoke up for the poor in our society".

But, he did turn to the upper classes of society and asked some of them to sponsor his first Kilmarnock edition, and this is the letter he wrote to them.

To the Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonia Hunt. Listen to the manner in which he displays his talent as a letter writer, not written as a peasant ploughman, but as one human being to another.

Listen to the sheer genius of his written word.

My Lords and Gentlemen, - a Scottish Bard, proud of the name, and whose highest ambition is to sing in his country's service – where shall he so properly look for patronage as to the illustrious names of his native land? – those who bear the honours and inherit the virtues of their ancestors.

The poetic genius of my Country found me, as the prophetic bard Elijah did Elisha, at the plough, and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes, and rural pleasures of my native soil, in my native tongue.

I tuned my wild; artless notes as she inspired. She whispered me to come to this ancient metropolis of Caledonia, and lay my songs under your honoured protection. I now obey her dictates.

Though much indebted to your goodness, I do not approach you, my lords and gentlemen, in the usual style of dedication, to thank you for past favours; that path is so hackneyed by prostituted learning, that honest rusticity is ashamed of it. Nor do I present this address with the venal soul of a servile author, looking for a continuation of those favours.

I was bred to the plough, and am independent. I come to claim the common Scottish name with you, my illustrious countrymen, and to tell the world that I glory in the title.

I come to congratulate my Country that the blood of her ancient heroes still runs uncontaminated; and that from your courage, knowledge, and public spirit, she may expect protection, wealth and liberty.

In the last place, I come to proffer my warmest wishes to the great fountain of honour, the monarch of the universe, for your welfare and happiness.

When you go forth to waken the echoes, in the ancient and favourite amusement of your forefathers may pleasure ever be your party, and may social joy await your return. When harassed in courts or camps with the jostlings of bad men and bad measures, may the honest consciousness of injured worth attend your return to your native seats; and may domestic happiness, with a smiling welcome, meet you at your gates! May corruption shrink at your kindling, indignant glance; and may tyranny in the ruer and licentiousness in the people, equally find you an inexorable foe!

*I have the honour to be,
with the sincerest gratitude and highest respect,
my Lords and Gentlemen,
your humble servant,
Robert Burns*

What a legacy to leave behind for his fellow Scots today, and with the words of Robert Burns, I too, I come to claim the Scottish name with you, my illustrious countrymen, and that name is Robert Burns, and to tell the world I glory in the fact he was one of us.

In the song, “One Moment in Time”, by Albert Hammond, which I quoted at the start of this Toast, the lyrics of the last verse sum up for me, Robert Burns life, they could have been written for him.

Each day I live, I want to be
A day to give, the best of me
I'm only one, but not alone
My finest day, is yet unknown

My finest day is yet unknown? Robert Burns finest day, is now marked Annually, and our Club is proud of it's historical place in being the, "Oldest Documented Burns Club in the World", and it will be my privilege to toast his memory using his favourite drinking cup, a piece of Burns memorabilia belonging to our Club.

. His "Moment in Time", is now celebrated throughout the World, following the pattern set by us in 1805, another Paisley Pattern. As people of all races and social standing pay tribute to his legacy of song and poetry which is so much a part of our tiny Nations history.

Gentlemen, in raising Robert Burns Cup, I would ask you to be upstanding and join me in the toast to the;

"The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns".