

Mr.Croupier, honoured guests, and fellow members.

Why a poet? Why should we be gathered together tonight in celebration of the life and work of a man who was a poet ? And if someone was to suggest that the reason is that our particular Club was founded by a man who was himself a poet and that our particular town is one that once was famous for its poets, that does not explain why there are gatherings like this all over Scotland, and indeed all over the world, tonight celebrating the work of Robert Burns, a poet. For it is as a poet that we admire him. He wasn't a very good farmer; he wasn't a particularly successful exciseman, or for that matter anything else; he would have been forgotten long ago if it hadn't been for his poetry.

Every nation tends to have its own heroes, people who made a contribution of some kind to their country's development that has caused them to be remembered long afterwards, to have statues built in their honour, to have their birth places noted, their faces appear on banknotes, and have streets, squares and even whole towns named after them . Somehow they are seen as having qualities that render them fitting symbols of a nation's pride in itself and its history. For Americans, a combination of pioneering spirit and statesmanship, coupled with success, seems to be what has been required, and Abraham Lincoln has filled the bill admirably. The English have tended to choose soldiers and sailors, like Wellington and Nelson, or statesman-like figures such as Queen Elizabeth I or Winston Churchill. The French have of course Napoleon; the Germans have Bismarck, and the Italians have Garibaldi or perhaps Julius Caesar. The Russians are more political and have Lenin, the Indians have a philosopher statesman in Mahatma Gandhi, and China has Mao Tse-Tung. They all tend to have been notable patriots, or to have been men who inspired patriotism

There are few such heroic figures seem to come from the arts, although there are examples like Rembrandt appearing on the banknotes of the Netherlands, or Beethoven or Rossini being second-line heroes from Germany or Italy, while Shakespeare's birthplace is a major tourist attraction in England. But nevertheless it is relatively rare for a nation to focus its pride on someone like a poet, and virtually unparalleled for that focus to take the form of dinners such as this. So why do we do it in Scotland?

It is not as if we had nobody else to be proud of. Although a small nation, we in Scotland have produced an astonishingly large number of

men who have made an important contribution to developments all over the world. If we wished a soldier patriot we could choose Wallace or Bruce. We have had great inventors like James Watt, Alexander Graham Bell, and John I. Logie Baird. We have had men who transformed the world of medicine like James Young Simpson or Alexander Fleming. We have had explorers like David Livingstone and Mungo Park. We have had philosophers like David Hume and economists like Adam Smith. We have story tellers like Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson, and we have had romantic legendary leaders like Montrose or Bonny Prince Charlie. We have had at least a dozen figures that might elsewhere have been chosen as the national symbol, but we have chosen a poet, Robert Burns.

Oh, yes, we remember the others in various ways too, have named streets after them and put their faces on banknotes, but we don't hold annual dinners to celebrate their memories.

And yet it is not as if we have happened somehow to produce the world's greatest poet, a writer so clearly pre-eminent in his particular field that we had to choose him, in spite of all the merits of the others. To claim that just wouldn't be true. Men like Watt and Bell, Livingstone and Simpson are more important figures in the histories of their spheres of endeavour than Burns is in the history of poetry. His work is of a very high order, as I hope I shall show later in this address, but no one with any serious appreciation of poetry would put him in the same class as a writer like Shakespeare, who surpasses him easily in the extent and range of his work, the inventiveness of his language and the profundity of his thought.

And it is not as if we were as a nation somehow especially interested in poetry. People in this town of Paisley may have been once, but it is hardly true today. Torn Gibson has a talent for writing it, as we shall see after the interval, and Clark Hunter and one or two others are knowledgeable, while the rest of our members show an interest in a Burns' reading once a month throughout the winter, and are fairly exceptional in that — but the reading of poetry must come a long way down the list of the national pre-occupations of the Scots today.

Undoubtedly there has been a change in that respect over the last 200 years or so. If we had lived around 1800, then civilised men of our general standing in society would have taken an interest in poets. We would certainly have known the names of the best and have read something of their work, and if one happened to be visiting the place

where we lived, we would have been pleased and perhaps even anxious to make his acquaintance. That is why Robert Burns was so well received on his travels, why ladies and gentlemen of property were pleased to have him as a guest in their homes, for to be a poet in those days was to be a celebrity. But that is hardly the case today, when, unflattering as the word may seem, it would be truer to say that to be a poet is to be a curiosity.

We could think for a moment about the founder of this Club, Robert Tannahill. In his own day he was a minor poet; now he is a forgotten poet. But the interesting thing is that he wanted to be a poet, that he saw poetry as a natural medium for the expression of his feelings, and that it was in poetry that he found escape from the monotony of his weaving. A man of talent and imagination, with a gift for song and an interest in literature; today he might have been a school teacher, perhaps Head of English in Paisley Grammar, writing lyrics or television scripts on the side; then his ambition was to be recognised as a poet. There are of course various reasons why we are not as interested in poetry now. The first is that there are so many other leisure activities and art forms available to us, and it is much easier for us to hear good music or see good drama than it was 200 years ago - either by going to a live concert or theatre or by doing so via a machine.

Moreover, art that is successful today tends to be linked closely to technological development, with high quality music being made available through records, cassettes and compact discs, drama through television, and even a relatively new art form like the cinema being kept alive by the existence of the video cassette. It is an age of mass art, art communicated mainly through a technological medium which demands visual images, and poetry is not well suited to it. Furthermore, art today often has a commercial aspect to it, and the art forms which flourish or even just survive need to make money or attract sponsorship. Poetry cannot make money, and it lacks the mass appeal or the visual impact to make it a suitable medium for sponsorship.

This is related to the fact that the poetry which is written in the second half of the twentieth century appeals to relatively few people. If we try to read it, it often seems strange, different from what we expected, and few of us are prepared to make the effort to appreciate it. Why don't people now write poetry like Burns did, or something like, say, Fitzgerald's "Rubaiyat", or Yeats' "Isle of Innisfree"? Poetry isn't like that now. Why not? Why doesn't any serious poet try to write like Robert Burns today? And the answer of course is that it has been done.

Art forms must evolve; they must grow and develop or they wither away. A modern poet would not try to write like Burns, for the same reason that a modern composer wouldn't try to write music like Mozart or Beethoven. It has been done, and it cannot be bettered. Do you ever wonder why they don't make western films like "High Noon" or "Shane" anymore? - the answer is that that particular art genre reached its peak in our lifetime in the 50s and 60s, and they cannot better it now, only produce occasional pale imitations.

Art forms evolve or they die. Think of the work of the Moghul architects in India in the mid—16th and early 17th centuries, whose work came to a peak in the building of the Taj Mahal. They kept on trying to build like that for a hundred years or so after the Taj , and it faded away for lack of fresh imagination, with the gleaming marble replaced by crumbling stucco that no one bothers to go to see.

If Burns had been alive today, it is most unlikely that he ever would have been a poet. He would have grown up watching television and listening to pop records; he would almost certainly have become interested in politics; and with his gift for communication he might well have become a media man himself - either as one of those who work with the media, like a newspaper editor or a television personality, or one of those who use the media to project their ideas like a politician. His talent would have taken him to the top, whatever he did, but if he had written poetry it would probably only have been as a spare-time hobby.

Yet here we are tonight, gathered to celebrate him as a poet. Why ??

There is of course an element of convention, of coming along to an evening like this for the sheer enjoyment of the conviviality it brings, and perhaps in the middle of winter we need an excuse for an occasion of this kind. But that is hardly sufficient to explain the phenomenon, for people all over the world are also engaged tonight in the unlikely practice of celebrating a poet who died nearly 200 years ago, and some of them are doing it in countries like New Zealand, where it is the middle of the summer. If they only wanted an excuse for a convivial evening, they could surely come up with another one of their own. There must be a better explanation than that.

Of course there is, and now that I attempt to give it, I cannot say anything that has not been said before, and said better at that, for this toast is given every year by thousands of speakers, and over the last 150 years almost every Scotsman of any distinction has been required to attempt an answer to my question. But sometimes the familiar is still worth repeating.

Successful artists either develop the existing format, or they try, like the Impressionist painters, to break away from them completely and do something new. Robert Burns was of the former kind, and he took as his starting point a tradition of poetry which had been established in Scotland by earlier writers like Robert Sempill, Alan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, and then he raised that to a level where it couldn't be bettered.

In doing so, he was aided by certain qualities that came from within himself, and one was strength of feeling. Whatever he cared about - whether it be a girl he was in love with at the time, or his resentment of the inequalities of the society of his day, or his scorn of the hypocrisy of some of the churchmen he saw around him, or his feelings of patriotism for his native land - he wrote with a strength of feeling that left his predecessors as pale shadows by comparison. If we took as the example of that his ability to write patriotic verse, you gentlemen have already experienced that strength of feeling tonight in the singing of Scots Wha Hae, and I have asked Nicky McMillan to sing another of his patriotic songs later in the evening to illustrate that strength of feeling again.

This was a Jacobite love song which he modelled on an earlier street ballad called "Mally Stewart", and he manages in it to give a striking evocation of the mood of the Jacobites' Lost Cause, to link the love of country with the love of a woman, and to combine then both in a sense of exile which I find very powerful. Perhaps I could read it for a moment.

It was a for Our rightfu' King
We left fair Scotland's strand;
It was a' for our rightfu' King
We e'er saw Irish land, my dear,
We e'er saw Irish land.

Now, a' is done that men can do,
And a' is done in vain;

My Love and Native Land fareweel,
For I maun cross the main, my dear,
For I maun cross the main.

He turn'd him right and round about,
Upon the Irish shore;
And gae his bridle reins a shake,
With adieu for evermore, my dear,
And adieu for evermore.

The soger frae the wars returns,
The sailor frae the main;
But I hae parted frae my love,
Never to meet again, my dear,
Never to meet again.

When day is gane, and night is come,
And a' folk bound to sleep;
I think on him that's far awa,
The lee-lang night and weep, my dear,
The lee-lang night and weep.

The second gift that allowed him to raise his kind of poem to its peak was that of finding the perfect expression for ideas of lasting significance. A reader of one of his poems or a listener to one of his songs finds Burns saying exactly what he would have liked to have been able to say himself, but saying it far more effectively than he ever could. For example, anyone who has been in love and had to part from the beloved, recognises the perfection of Burns' communication of the poignancy of that moment in 'Ae Fond Kiss'

Had we never lov'd sae kindly
Had we never lov'd sae blindly
Never met - or never parted
We had ne'er been broken-hearted

Those two qualities made him a great poet, but there was also a third one which made him not just our poet, but the world's. This was his ability to express the aspirations not just of Scots, but of mankind. This is what has given him the universality of his appeal. People who have never seen Scotland, and who never will, have recognised in his work something that expresses their own innermost feelings, because at his best he was writing not just for his country and for his age, but for all countries and for all ages.

That is seen most clearly of course in a song that you are going to be singing later on this evening — “A Man's a Man for a' that” - the last lines of which are an affirmation of the brotherhood of man which has rung round the world ever since it was written. But I won't end my toast with that; it is too conventional; and besides I want to end with the one we'll all end with, round about 11 o'clock this evening, a song that everyone thinks he knows, but which we all take far too much for granted.

“Auld Lang Syne” goes back to an old anonymous ballad, printed in the Bannatyne Manuscripts of 1568 entitled “Auld Kyndness Forgett”, and to another version attributed to Aytoun and Semphill, perhaps dated about 1630, in which these two lines appear -

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never thought upon

Burns must have known that version, for in 1788, in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop, he referred to the Scots phrase “Auld Lang Syne”, and went on to say that there was an old song with that title which had often thrilled his soul. Shortly afterwards his own song was written.

It is an interesting illustration of his poetic gifts to see what Burns did to give it its place as the traditional song of parting in so many lands. He recognised that the phrase “Auld Lang Syne” encompassed both the idea of times long past and that of the friendships of those days, and he proceeded to clothe those ideas with simple images, which refer to experiences which most of us can feel we have shared, and which we half remember through a veil of nostalgia, so that they become, as it were, the symbols of our lost youth —

We twa hae run about the braes,
and pou'd the gowans fine:
But we've wander'd mony a weary fitt,
Sin' auld lang syne.

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

But if in these verses we remember the past, we do not have to do so sadly, for we are doing it in the context of present happiness and fellowship, and Burns brings the poem to a climax through the time honoured custom of clasping hands and sharing a drink together -

And there's a hand, my trusty fiere
And gie's a hand o'thine
And we'll tak a right gude—willie waught
For auld lang syne

If one seeks to explain why that song came to be so well known across the world, one can refer to the growth of the Burns legend in the early part of the 19th century, at the same time as the wave of emigration that took Scots to America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and so on, and wherever they went they took this song with them. Scottish regiments were prominent in the Napoleonic Wars, the suppression of the Indian Mutiny, the Crimean War ; and the Boer War, and at their social evenings and formal dinners this song came to mark the traditional end to the evening. But the most important reason for the song's success must have been the appeal of its sentiments, which made it appropriate for so many occasions.

It is very remarkable that one song, without the aid of any mass media should thus have captured a special place in the hearts of so much of the world. If Burns could only have received royalties from it, he might have written nothing else and been a very rich man, but I like to think that the poet we are remembering tonight would have derived mere satisfaction from knowing that he had found the right expressions for the feeling of so many people in so many lands, across the oceans and across the years.

Gentlemen, why a poet? — Because although he may not have been the greatest poet, he is the world's poet as well as ours, and the Club that has been the longest to recognise and celebrate his achievement honours him again tonight.

Gentlemen, I give you the toast of the Immortal Memory of Robert

Burns.”