

## THE FIRST IMMORTAL MEMORY

*The first documented Immortal Memory Toast in the world, delivered by William McLaren, President of the Paisley Burns Club at the Anniversary Supper in the Star Inn on the 29th January 1805.*

Gentlemen,

It is with infinite pleasure that I see, at this moment, so many men of taste, so many fond and enthusiastic lovers of Scottish song, met on this evening to celebrate the birth of our immortal bard. Let those whom fortune has placed in a more elevated situation in life, basking in the sunshine of prosperity, bind the fading laurel round the brow of the hero, who returns to his native land, rich with the spoils of a ravaged country, and clotted with the blood of an innocent people; be it ours to give the night to festivity and joy, on which nature, partial to cold Scotia, gave her a Burns, a name which will remain the proudest boast of our country, a name which will excite the veneration of an admiring world till the springs of Nature decay, and time itself will be no more.

Born in an obscure situation in life, and nursed in the lap of poverty, he knew not those advantages for which we are, probably, indebted for the most finished productions of our language, but guided by the warm impulses of nature, he sung what he felt, and his songs will be admired forever.

When the entreaties of friends and cruelties of fortunes (alas! too often the melancholy attendant of genius) first bade our bard submit his juvenile productions to the eye of an admiring world, his discerning countrymen saw with delight, not the weak effort of presumptuous pedantry, struggling into notice, but the glorious dawns of a transcendent genius - a genius not to be weakened by time, nor depressed by misfortune - a genius who would, like the radiant lamp of heaven, move onward with increasing beauty, till gaining his meridian splendour when every surrounding object would be obscured in the lustre of his superior blaze.

The dark clouds of adversity which had long overshadowed our bard, now began to vanish, happily for himself, but more happily for his country, as the angry frowns of a cruel world had determined him to seek a milder fortune in one of those hospitable isles which Nature had scattered on the bosom of the Atlantic Ocean.

Transported from the bosom of honest austerity to the more refined circle of opulence and power, his many and respectable friends indulged the hope of seeing him placed in a situation, where, undisturbed by the cares of the world, he might pursue those studies for which nature had so admirably fitted him to excel. But, gentlemen, shall I mention it? Those minions of power, those favourites of fortune, suffered one of the brightest geniuses that ever adorned a country, to drudge through life a common exciseman! Ye generous patrons of exalted merit, when your vainglorious names shall be forgot, when your proud monuments shall lie prostrate in the dust, the name of our neglected bard shall flourish with unabated lustre. The tyranny of kings, the oppression of rulers, or the corruption of the people, may, at some future period, disturb the tranquillity of the world; arts, commerce, manufactures and even a love for song itself may sink in the vortex of destructive ruin, but when the gleam of discord shall have vanished, and returning felicity again illumine the brows of my countrymen, then shall the songs of our bard awaken the echoes of the morning. The musty walls of humble poverty, and the splendid palace of affluence and grandeur, shall alike resound his praise. But as the most general approbation is always clouded by some discordant voice, as our bard, by accustoming his imagination to an unrestrained indulgence, has not failed to waken the poisonous tongue of angry calumny, which has blazoned him to the world as an enemy to virtue. Gentlemen, I would consider it an insult offered to discernment of this respectable company were I to labour a refutation of an assertion which almost every page of the writings of this admirable poet is calculated to deny; quotations might be given, but 'twere an endless task and as well might unfettered enthusiasm endeavour to arrest the progress of nature; as point out the many beautiful, virtuous expressions that adorn the writings of our inimitable Burns.

Hail happy Caledonia! Though no clustering grapes hang pendant from thy barren mountains, though no spicy forests adorn thy fertile valleys, yet thou hast a richer and prouder boast; a bard, formed in the prodigality of nature, with an imagination fertile as the sunbeams.

While the pride of ancient times boasts of a Homer and a Virgil, while England bids the world admire a Milton and a Pope, where is the Scotchman that would not proudly proclaim the name of an Ossian and a Burns. Ossian, the transcendent lustre of thy genius has already bade defiance to the ravages of many ages, for pleasant are thy songs, as the dawn of morn to the benighted wanderer, when the flaky snow descends and all the world is silent and dark and shall thy glorious name, immortal Thomson, be forgot when we swell the strain of panegyric to our country's bards? No! While the sun's re-animating heat calls forth the spiky blasts from the bosom of the pregnant spring; while ardent summer displays her blossoming flow'rets to the golden day; while yellow autumn waves rich with the produce of a luxuriant year; or the howling blast of angry winter raves with threat'ning fury o'er cold Scotia's hill, thy fame shall last, and the guardian genius of thy native isle proudly own thee as her son!

Roll on, ye winged times, and, in your proud career, smile at the ruin of the great; and the fall of the mighty; weak the efforts of thy tyrannic arm to erase from the memory of a grateful people the virtues of those men who have raised our country to a proud pre-eminence amongst the nations of the world. For me, departed bards, when my heart ceases to thrill with rapture to the melodies of your songs, may the haggard hand of misery wring my flinty bosom; may the soft tears of sympathy never wet my sallow cheeks, but may I sneak through life, scorned by the world and hated by myself.

Gentlemen, I feel this the proudest moment of my life, in having it in my power, by your choice, to toast in so respectable a company The Memory of Our Immortal Bard, Robert Burns.

*The toast was drunk with enthusiasm, after which an Ode entitled; "The Birth of Burns" written for the occasion by Robert Tannahill was read to the company.*

*At the end of the evening it was resolved to meet annually on the same occasion and fifteen gentlemen were appointed to conduct the business for the ensuing year.*

### **1805 The Founder Members**

William McLaren	James Tannahill	William Anderson	William Wylie (1)	Charles Marshall
William Wylie (2)	Patrick McLerey	James Scadlock		
Robert Morgan	William Gemmil	Robert Lang	John King	
Robert A. Smith	Robert Tannahill	William Stewart		