Immortal Memory 2019

As many of you will know, as a member of Paisley Burns Club we are called upon to present a variety of talks at our monthly meetings.

When doing so, I have always left my preparation to the last minute and I was determined that tonight’s speech would be different.

Having arranged our June summer outing, proving that I could indeed organize a piss up in a brewery, I then settled back to research my Immortal Memory.

After considering various topics, I decided upon something which has impacted on our lives over the past year. You’ll be glad to hear it’s not Brexit but the 100 year anniversary of the end of the First World War and the signing of the Armistice.

Tonight, gentlemen, as we gather to celebrate the 260th birthday of Robert Burns, we should remember that, although he lived for only 37 years, his life and works have had a profound influence on the world, not only during his lifetime but every year since.

It is interesting to note that it took only nine years from his death for the first and oldest Burns Club - Paisley - to be founded.

So what exactly is it that ties 18th century Robert Burns to the 20th century conflict that H.G. Wells described as ‘ The War to end all wars ‘ ?

There have always been conflicts around the world and just before and throughout Burns’ lifetime it was no different - including the Jacobite Rebellions, the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

Although Burns did write about these conflicts and held strong views on the subject of the monarchy and revolution, he could not really be described as a war poet in the same sense as the First World War poets.

He could be considered more as a poet of the home front encouraging the soldiers who read his work to think of home and to remember the good times, to keep their spirits up and remind them of their loved ones at home as in his song ‘ Green Grow The Rashes‘, with the lines

‘ The Sweetest Hours that e’er I spent

Are spent among the lasses, O ‘

As we move into the 20th Century, just before the outbreak of the First World War, Hans Hecht, godson of the composer Brahms and who had been educated at Oxford,was appointed Professor of English at Basel University in Switzerland.

Hecht had prepared material for his book ‘ Robert Burns - the Man and his Work ’which was due to be published in 1914 but the Great War intervened and the German edition of the work was not published until after the war.

This seems to have been a culmination of the interest that Burns’ work had received in Germany over the preceding 80 years, with 4 Scots language editions of his poems being published in Germany between 1841 and 1859 and at least 12 editions and selected works being translated into German around the same time, with some of these going into a third reprint.

So it would appear that, as the world moved towards war, Robert Burns was perhaps as well known throughout Germany and Europe as he was in his native land.

Conflicts, whether they be local skirmishes or world wars, seem to be one of the catalysts for people to write poems and the Great War was no different, but what could Burns’ contribution possibly be to a war that, 118 years after his death, would keep his immortal memory alive and continued to grow it around the world.

Robert Burns may have been long dead before the Guns of the Great War began firing but his poems and songs were used in ways he could not have imagined.

Unlike the wars fought during Burns’ lifetime the Great War was the first European war that the nation would fight with an educated and literate population.

It would also be the last war where the printed word was the means of transmitting information and intelligence and to this end poems such as Tennyson’s ‘ Charge of the Light Brigade ‘ were dusted down in order to show the historic courage of the British soldier.

**‘ Forward the Light Brigade**

**Charge for the guns he said**

**Into the valley of Death**

**Rode the six hundred ‘**

Scotland was no different in this respect and newspapers such as The Scotsman, The Glasgow Herald and our own Paisley Daily Express published an increasing number of poems at the same time looking at our traditional writers for reassurance and in Scotland that of course meant Robert Burns.

Burns occupied a prominent and distinct place in Scotland both in high and low culture and by the end of the 19th century several statues to honour Burns had already been erected throughout the country, one of these being in Paisley in 1896.

Burns was no great admirer of the system and, with his stance on individual liberty in every sense of the word, Burns and his works were the ideal way for the authorities to promote the view of the plucky British Tommy battling the Teutonic armies.

This celebration of Burns continued throughout the war and would stress the commonalities between our British and Scottish past.

In 1914 Britain went to war with a small professional army, principally designed to police its overseas empire. It consisted of :-

250,000 Regulars

250,000 Territorials

200,000 Reservists

By the end of the war the army had reached it maximum strength of around 6,000,000 but it had also suffered large casualties with nearly 700,000 killed and 1,700,000 wounded. And, as we recently learned at a Club night, these included members of Paisley Burns Club.

As I just mentioned these war poems were used to instil a sense of pride in the ‘ plucky British Tommy ‘ and this spirit shone through in a remarkable way with 627 soldiers receiving the Victoria Cross, among them 74 Scots.

I think the following short story sums up the courage of our soldiers on the battlefield. A Carnoustie man, Seaman George Samson, was awarded the Victoria Cross for this action, under heavy fire when he helped the wounded at the landings in Gallipoli. His citation reads :-

‘ He was hit over and over again and when he returned to England his body still contained a dozen pieces of shrapnel ‘

His family speaking last year said :-

‘ We are quite proud of him. He was a very brave man. He had 17 bullets in him. ‘

Many more who deserved the Victoria Cross are never talked about.

Throughout the war years, considering the large number of men who joined the army and with all the deaths and casualties, you would tend to think that the membership of Burns Clubs would be in decline and certainly a number of the established clubs met on a fairly infrequent basis or not at all.

In fact, the number of clubs grew from 227 in 1914 to 254 by the end of the war.

Was this caused by the upsurge in war poetry along with a greater interest in Burns’ own poetry during this time or was it also that several other significant Burns events took place over the war years? These events included the unveiling of the Burns Statue in Stirling and later the release of a seven-volume Braille edition of the Bard’s poems along with the inauguration of the refurbished

Burns Cottage in Mauchline. There were also numerous Burns concerts and celebrations, often in relation to troop entertainment and fundraising.

Dr David Goldie in his paper ‘ Robert Burns and the First World War ‘ recalls some of these events.

The People’s Journal marked the Bard’s Birthday in January 1915 by running a ‘ Burns Telegram to the Kaiser ‘ Competition, in which readers were invited to compose a short message from Burns to the German Emperor - an interesting concept.

In Glasgow its best known football team, Partick Thistle, sponsored an annual Burns Night throughout the war, with the Glasgow Abstainers Union holding its own annual concert. Although I’m not sure how well this type of event would be attended in the City of Culture.

Apart from boosting the morale of the people these events could raise substantial sums for the war charities and a ‘ Rabbie Burns ‘ matinee at the Glasgow Pavilion in 1918, raised over £1000 for Erskine Hospital ( £50,000 in today’s money ).

Further afield British prisoners set up their own unofficial clubs and entertained themselves and other prisoners with Burns songs and events.

At a YMCA hut in France in 1918 the Scotsman paper recalled such a Burns Supper where it was said

‘ *Of course there were many Englishmen there and they were almost as eager listeners as the Scots. “ Everyone is interested in Burns “ said one English officer ‘.*

But what of Burns’ own work? It should come as no surprise that his rousing poem ‘ Scots wha hae ‘, which takes the form of a speech given by Robert the Bruce before the Battle of Bannockburn and implores the Scots to fight for victory against the forces of England’s King Edward, would be used as part of the recruiting efforts for the British Army and would be hijacked as an anthem for the British soldier, finding its way into the Oxford University Press publication ‘ Poems of War and Battle ‘, with the poem itself or excerpts from it used repeatedly throughout the war.

When virtually the whole of the Glasgow Tramway Department went off to war, as the Highland Light Infantry 15th Battalion, they did so to a speech where Baillie Kirkland told the soldiers to take their inspiration from Burns, quoting :-

*‘ Lay the proud usurper low!*

*Tyrants fall in every foe!.*

*Liberty’s in every blow!*

*Let us do,or die! ‘*

These sentiments were further alluded to when the Daily Record hailed the song as ‘at once the most war-like and the most patriotic war anthem ever composed ‘.

As early as 1914 during the famous ‘ Christmas Truce ‘ both sides were singing what is probably Burns’ best known song ‘ Auld Lang Syne ‘, while in early 1915 the People’s Journal published another article on ‘ Robert Burns the Recruiter - the Inspiration of his songs ‘. Then later that year Burns finally achieved the ultimate praise, becoming a ‘poster boy ‘ when a recruiting poster featuring a plaque of his head was released with the words:-

‘WHAT BURNS SAID IN 1782 HOLDS GOOD IN 1915 ‘

followed by the verse

***‘ O why the deuce should I repine***

***and be an ill foreboder***

***I’m twenty three and five foot nine***

***I’ll go and be a sodger ‘***

Of course Burns had been a member of the Dumfries Volunteers and this was mentioned on a regular basis, stating how Scotland was proud of her patriotic Bard, with the British Army finding an abiding honour in once having had the name of Robert Burns on the roll of the Dumfries Volunteers.

As I mentioned earlier, war and conflicts seem to be a catalyst for poetry and the Great War was no exception. In one of the most comic yet poignant television series on the Great War

‘ Blackadder goes Forth ’ there is an episode entitled Private Plane. In it Captain Blackadder is shot down over enemy territory and captured by the German Flying Ace Baron Von Richthofen.

When Lord Flashart arrives to rescue him, Blackadder seems reluctant to be rescued and go back to the front line. Flashart responds to him

‘ I’m beginning to understand. Do you not think we are all fed up with this war- The blood, the noise, the endless poetry. ‘

As in every literary field there is always the good, the bad and sometimes even the ugly and the poetry of the Great War was no exception. It seemed like Burns’ poem ‘ Scots wha hae ‘ was everywhere and could be utilized in many forms with some budding poets giving their own take on it. Published in the Evening Times was this verse:-

*Now’s the time to prove that you,*

*To your father’s memories true,*

*Fight as only Scotsmen do –*

*Fight for liberty”*

And in 1917 the Georgetown Munitions complex, which became R.O.F Bishopton and is now a housing estate, published a war time magazine know as the Georgetown Gazette. Another variation of the poem appeared in it:-

*“Sons of Britain! Far and near,*

*Hark! The call of battle clear,*

*Stake for home and altar dear,*

*And for liberty.*

An anonymous writer in the People’s Journal had the excellent idea of adopting the monologue of ‘ Holy Willie’s Prayer ‘ for the German Kaiser .

Another Willie, or should I say Wilhelm, currently being held up for ridicule.

As I mentioned, it was endless poetry during the war, none less than the ‘ Trench Poetry ‘ which was written by the ordinary soldier - probably, if for no other reason, than to relieve the boredom of life in the trenches.

Over 200 trench poems were published recently under the title ‘ Tommy Rot - WW1 Poetry They Didn’t Let You Read ‘. Most were unpublished except in regimental magazines which were, unbelievably, produced right behind the front lines.

‘ My Little Dry Home In The Wet ‘ is a poem by Sgt Charles H Moss of the Durham Light Infantry and reflects his feelings on life in the trenches.

*I’ve a little wet home in a trench, that rainstorms continually drench,*

*there’s the sky overhead ,clay or mud for a bed*

*and stones I use as a bench.*

*Bullied beef and hard biscuits we chew,*

*it seems years since we tasted a stew,*

*shells crackle and scare,*

*yet no place can compare, with my little wet home in the trench.*

As expected there was also a lot of black humour in the poems with death all around them. On the death of a tall comrade, one soldier wrote:-

*When we’re digging trenches, Jim,*

*we shall always think of you:*

*instead of digging 4 feet 6*

*we’ll be digging 6 feet 2.*

Another soldier on the first day of the Battle of the Somme wrote:-

*And when all was over*

*I am sorry to relate*

*all that we could muster*

*was one hundred and twenty eight.*

But what of the great poets of the first world war, amongst them Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke and Robert Graves, who beautifully described the pity and loss of the conflict raging all around them?

One of Brooke’s best known poems ‘ The Soldier ‘ deals with death and the accomplishments of the soldier and contains the now famous lines:-

*‘ If I should die,*

*Think only this of me*

*That there’s some corner of a foreign field*

*That is forever England. ‘*

In 1917 Siegfried Sassoon, despite having shown exceptional bravery - some would say suicidal bravery - and having being awarded the Military Cross, became a focal point for dissent within the armed forces when he wrote his famous letter to his commanding officer:-

‘ Finished with the War—a Soldier’s Declaration ‘

The letter followed Sassoon’s years of service on the Western Front and the death of his friend David Thomas. He was almost court martialed and it was only after the intervention of his friend, fellow poet, Robert Graves, that Sassoon was declared unfit for duty and sent to Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, where he was officially treated for Shellshock.

Here he met fellow poet, Wilfred Owen, who would eventually exceed him in fame, but only through Sassoon’s help and guidance - particularly in relation to Owen’s famous poem

‘ Anthem for Doomed Youth ‘, with the opening line:-

‘ What passing bells for these who die as cattle ’

Sassoon and Owen spent several months at Craiglockhart and it seems to me that, while writing poetry in Edinburgh, they cannot fail to have been influenced by local Scottish talent such as Burns, Scott and Stevenson, albeit I cannot find any evidence to that effect.

What I did discover however on the BBC website - ‘ Spoken Word - Let Poetry into your Life ‘

was an A-Z of poetry containing 60 poems amongst which were 4 by Robert Burns and 4 by Wilfred Owen.

However there was one war poet who by his own admission declared Robert Burns as one of his strongest influences in his early poetic years stating:-

‘ My Great- Grandfather had been a cronie of Robert Burns and claimed him as a second cousin. One of our parlour chairs had often been warmed by the rump of the Bard. To my folks anything that rhymed was poetry and Rabbie Burns was their idol. ‘

He goes on to state:-

‘ I felt a spiritual kinship with him. I would try to convince my friends that Burns was greater than Shakespeare. ‘

Robert Service was raised in Scotland and left for Canada at the age of 22. His earlier work entitled ‘ The Spell of the Yukon and other verses ‘ contained a total of 33 poems, one of these being the wonderful poem ‘ The Shooting of Dan Mc Grew ‘ - apparently written in one evening following a brawl in a saloon near to his home.

***‘ A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute Saloon***

***The kid that handles the music box was hitting a rag-time tune.***

***Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat dangerous Dan McGrew***

***And watching his luck was his light-o-love, the lady that’s known as Lou. ‘***

By the time war broke out in 1914 Service was 41and, although he tried to enlist, he was turned down, eventually joining the American Red Cross as an ambulance driver until his health broke.

It was whilst convalescing in Paris that he wrote his latest book of poetry ‘ Rhymes of a Red Cross Man ‘.

In this collection the poem that clearly draws on Burns’ work as a poetic model is ‘ The Haggis of Private McPhee ‘ The title immediately suggests that this would be a parody on Burns’ poem ‘Address to a Haggis ‘. But in reality Service’s poem has more similarity to ‘ Tam o’ Shanter ‘ in that both poems are stories about a journey through a terror ridden landscape; Tam through an imaginary drunken journey home on his horse Meg avoiding witches along the way, while the soldiers in Service’s poem journey through a more realistic battle landscape with all the horrors of war.

The poem relates how Private McPhee receives a Haggis from back home to enable him to celebrate Burns’ immortal memory with his comrades even while in the trenches at the front line.

*‘ A HAGGIS, A HAGGIS SAID PRIVATE McPHEE*

*THE BRAWEST BIG HAGGIS I EVER DID SEE*

*AND THINK – IT’S THE MORN WHEN FOND MEMORY TURNS*

*TO HAGGIS AND WHISKY THE BIRTHDAY OF BURNS.‘*

Privates McPhee and McPunn are sent out on a listening patrol into No Mans Land while one of their cronies offers to cook the Haggis for their return.

While they are in No Man’s Land a German Tunnel Mine goes off which results in McPhee losing a leg and McPunn being blinded.

Not wanting to miss the Haggis, the two soldiers work together to get back to their trench.

McPunn carries McPhee, who guides them both back home, only to discover on their return that their beloved Haggis has been annihilated by a German shell.

‘ I’D JIST LIFTET IT OOT O’ THE POT

*AND THERE IT LAY STEAMIN’ AND SAVOURY HOT*

*WHEN SUDDENLY I DOOKED AT THE FLEESH OF A SHELL*

*AND IT DROPPED ON THE HAGGIS AND DINGED IT TAE HELL ‘*

On hearing this news, the whole unit are up in arms and decide to take their revenge on the Germans :

*‘ AND WILD TO THE WELKIN THEIR BATTLE CRY RANG*

*AND DOON ON THE BOSCH LIKE TIGERS THEY SPRANG*

*AND THERE WISNA A MAN BUT HAD DEATH IN HIS EE*

*FOR HE THOUGHT O’ THE HAGGIS O’ PRIVATE McPHEE. ‘*

Service went on to write many more poems and books and in the Second World War he toured American army camps reading his poetry and working in Hollywood alongside John Wayne and Marlene Dietrich. After the war he returned to Britain where he lived until his death in 1958.

Like Burns, another war poet with Scottish ancestry became more famous after his death than when writing his poetry.

E Alan Mackintosh has been described as ‘ the most famous war poet you have probably never heard of ‘, his best poems having been compared in quality to those of Rupert Brooke.

He joined the Seaforth Highlanders and, while in France in May 1916, Mackintosh led a successful raid on a German trench, during which three of his men had arms and legs blown off and, despite his struggles to carry them back to the British lines, they all died.

The action brought him the Military Cross, though he wrote that he would rather have the boys’ lives back. This incident inspired him to write what is considered to be his best poem, ‘ In Memoriam ’ The final verse displays the depth of the love for his men and the sense of responsibility to his duty:

‘ Happy and young and gallant,

They saw their first-born go,

But not the strong limbs broken

And the beautiful men brought low,

The piteous writhing bodies,

They screamed ‘ Don’t leave me, Sir ‘,

For they were only your fathers

But I was your officer. ‘

Even after being injured several times this sense of responsibility led Mackintosh back again and again to the front lines in France where he was eventually killed on 21st November 1917, aged 24. These lines from his poem entitled ‘ A Creed ‘ are engraved on the Scottish American War Memorial in Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh:

‘ If it be life that waits, I shall live forever unconquered

If death, I shall die, at last strong in my pride and free. ‘

Robert Burns the man was long dead when war broke out in 1914 but I think there is no doubt that his works both in poetry and song had an uplifting effect on our country at war and on the men and women fighting that war.

Burns’ ain folk have always been a proud nation, with the Jocks ready to fight, sometimes at the drop of a hat to preserve their national pride and way of life.

When it was first introduced in January 1856, 5 of the first 10 Victoria Crosses were awarded to Scottish Soldiers.

We now know that during the Great War the soldiers, including those fighting in the trenches on the front line, got together to celebrate Burns night and to eat haggis and sing Burns’ songs. Tonight around the world thousands of Burns Suppers are taking place to celebrate the birthday and memory of our National Bard.

I would just like to finish with the final words of Burns’ song of 1795, which I’m sure many of the soldiers fighting during that Great War would have wished for long before the November Armistice:-

‘ For a’ that an a’ that

It’s coming yet for a’ that

That man to man the World o’er

Shall brothers be for a’ that. ‘

There can be few people in this world whose memory can truly be described as immortal, but tonight I’m sure you would all agree we are celebrating one such man.

Gentlemen, please rise and toast the immortal memory of Robert Burns.