

ROBERT BURNS

THE name of Robert Burns is a well-understood signal for an overflow of all sorts of commonplaces from the right-minded critic. These commonplaces run mainly in three channels—ecstatic astonishment at finding that a ploughman was also a poet; wringing of hands over the admission that the ploughman and poet was likewise a drunkard, and a somewhat miscellaneous lover; and caustic severity upon the lionizers and “admirers of native genius” who could find no employment more appropriate than that of excise-officer for the brightest and finest mind of their country and generation. All these commonplaces must stand confessed as warranted by the facts; they are truths, but they are also truisms. We have heard them very often, and have always sat in meek acquiescence and unfeigned concurrence. But the time comes when they have been repeated frequently enough to make the enlarging upon them a weariness, and the profuse and argumentative re-enforcement of them a superfluity. The reader of the following few observations will, I dare say, consent to understand once for all that Burns really was a ploughman—his own plough-driver on his father's or his own small farm; and became in due course of time a great poet, and in undue course a toper; and was fit for much loftier occupation than the gauging of ale-barrels, and seizing of illicit stills. The reader and I may start from these facts as rather elementary data; and he will perhaps not resent my stating them in such reasonable brevity as consists with my plan, and without much “improving” of the occasion. There are plenty of other books concerning Burns where powerful fountain-heads of morality, and of ardent but deprecatory enthusiasm, are kept continually on tap.

Robert Burness (or Burnes)—for such was his inherited patronymic, though in after years he thought fit to condense it into Burns—was born on the 25th of January (some authorities say the 29th), 1759, at a small cottage in the parish of Alloway, about two miles south-west of the town of Ayr. His father, William Burness, was son of a farmer in Kincardineshire. Owing to the poverty of his family, he had in youth come south, and had served as a gardener in various families. In December, 1757, he had married Agnes Brown, who survived by many years her illustrious son. The father, a man of superior understanding, and of the strong, upright, self-respecting character so honourably distinctive of the better Scotch peasantry, took, when he married, a perpetual lease of seven acres of land, which he cultivated as a nurseryman; here he personally built his own cottage. Robert was the eldest son of the union. His father had a dire struggle to maintain for a decent subsistence, and to educate his family. Robert was sent to a neighbouring school in the sixth year of his age, and soon showed some bookish likings; afterwards, he received a little instruction at home, partly from his father. He managed to pick up a smattering of French (which he was not averse to airing in after years), and had a quarter of a year's practice in