

Robert Burns—Rebel

By PETER T. LECKIE

THE usual annual orations of the genius of the Scotch poet, Robert Burns, ignore his greatest characteristic, that of a rebel. He was a man who fought against oppression, whether it be the oppression of the priest or the laird, the government or the Presbytery; whether the source of oppression and authority be the kirk or state, Calvinism or feudalism. His weapon was poetry. The case of the common people was stated as never before against caste, wealth and privilege.

The new echo of liberty found the first expression from Burns in his poetry against oppression.

The new world he discovered was a very old world. It was the world of the common people. The country folks; the poor, oppressed, honest man, the toil worn cotter; the buirdly chieftains and clever hezies, all those ordinary everyday folk upon whose "toils obscure an' a' that" depends and has always depended the entire fabric of society; as Burns puts it "the simple hind, whose toil upholds the glittering show." He was not only born in poverty but lived and died in poverty that is the fate of the common people. He never accepted poverty for justice, but saw its injustice. "Why should a'e man better fare an' a' men brithers."

The apologists for things as they are, who seek to ordain Burns in the popular mind as a high priest of the gospel of content are guilty of perversion.

The puritans who gloat over his social failings never did worse than those apologists. He may have said "Contented wi' little," but added "and cantie wi' mair."

His discontent was the expression of the discontent of the common people.

Born in a Calvinistic world and straight-laced puritanism, Burns did what the great poets of spirituality could not do, because they had no humor. Milton, we are told, made Satan a Titanic rebel. Burns made him a laughing stock. Dante made Hades magnificently terrible. Burns abolished it. Burns' satire of predestination and hell is to be found in numerous poems.

"O Thou, wha in the Heavens dost dwell
Wha, as it pleases best thyself
Send'st ane to heaven and ten to hell
A' for Thy glory
And no for ony guid or ill
They've done afore Thee."

It was not the people who were demanding a more liberal theology but the more liberal-minded church patrons who were thrusting their new theology down the throats of the narrow-minded and unwilling presbyteries and congregations. Burns took the side of the liberal minded and appeared to be against the people, and Burns' achievement was to set the people free, not from corrupt church government, but first of all from the slavery of their own minds. The common people of Scotland had not lost their sense of humor and Burns' satire and humor caught them more than anything else because it appealed to their common sense. "Curst commonsense, that imp of hell," as the narrow religious people naturally regarded it. The press censor during the war could hardly appreciate Burns when he said:

"Here's freedom to him that would read,
Here's freedom to him that would write;
There's nae ever feared that the truth should be heard
But they wham the truth would indit" (Indict).

Burns knew of his poverty before he had read Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations." He did not require Adam Smith to tell him that riches and poverty are correlated as cause and effect. He had a better grasp of the cause of the selfishness of man than most people today. He wrote to a friend: "But we are placed here amid so much nakedness and hunger and poverty and want, that we are under the damning necessity of studying selfishness, in order that we may exist."

It is no surprise a man like Burns should find himself in sympathy with the French Revolution and also the American Revolution.

All kinds of pretenders seek to associate themselves with Robert Burns at his anniversary, but no defender of privilege, no opponent of liberty has a right to claim that Burns was on his side.

"See yonder poor, o'er labored wight
So abject, mean and vile,
Who begs a brother of the earth
To give him leave to toil;
And see his lordly fellow worm
The poor petition spurn
Unmindful, though a weeping wife
And helpless offspring mourn."

He asks.

"If I'm designed yon lordling's slave
By nature's law designed
Why was an independent wish
E'er planted in my mind?
If not, why am I subjected to
His cruelty or scorn,
Or why has man the will and power
To make his fellow mourn?"

Burns' religious commentators harp on the beautiful picture portrayed in the "The Cotter's Saturday Night." But it was the social life of the Scotch race with some of its joys snatched from a dreary environment of harrassing care and toil and trouble. They are, as it were, the bright spots in a picture lit up by the genius of Burns. But the shadows of the picture are deep and somber with a background of poverty. The man who sits at the head of the table, the priest-like father, trudged "weary o'er the moors" only an hour ago, and his spade, his mattocks and his hoe are truer emblems of his daily life than is the big Ha' Bible. They are happy folks on the merry day the year begins. They deserve to be, for all the rest of the year their lot has been "to drudge and drive through wet and dry," "howkin in shenchs" and "biggin dykes wi' dirty stanes," getting old before their time.

"For, ance that five-and-forty's speel'd
See crazy, weary, joyless eild
Wi' wrinkled face
Comes, hostin', hirplin' owre the field
Wi' creepin' pace."

This is no poetic figure but grim realism. Therefore the background of the picture of Scottish life portrayed by Burns is poverty. In the picture it is true there is love, laughter, dram drinking and high spirits in plenty, but beclouding it all there is poverty. There are not only the "poor o'er labored wight so abject, mean and vile, begging a brother of the earth to give him leave to toil." Not only age and want, the ill-matched pair, but side by side with these are the Ayr Presbyters, Holy Fairs, and the Holy Willies with their three mile prayers and half-mile graces, with their narrow outlook, their intolerance and bigotry and all the tyranny of hide-bound creeds and ignorant superstitions which held the common people in mental fetters. A picture of a people priest-ridden and laird-ridden held in a double bond of material and mental poverty, which seemed to give the lie to the assertion that "a man's a man," and from amidst this environment Burns sent the message to the world, "A man's a man for a' that."

Burns was a great patriot, not a stamp of the patriotism of today, which says "my country, right or wrong." If it had been we would not have found him supporting the American Revolution or the French Revolution. He was a patriot of the common people, and internationalist if you please. In his "Tree of Liberty" he says:

"Wi' plenty o' sic trees, I trow,
The world wa'd live in peace, man;
The sword we'd help to mak' a plough,
The din o' war wa'd cease, man;
Like brithers in a common cause,
We'd on each ither smile, man;
And equal rights and equal laws
Wa'd gladden every isle, man."

Burns' whole life was a struggle against poverty because of the private ownership of the land which made him a lordling's slave. In lines to Ferguson, a brother poet, he wrote:

"Oh, why should truest worth and genius pine,
Beneath the iron grasp of want and woe;
While titled knaves and idiot greatness shine
In all the splendor Nature can bestow?"

And to Thompson, another poet, he wrote:

"To whom have much, more shall be given,
Is every great man's faith;
But he, the helpless, needful, wretch,
Shall lose the mite he hath."

All his contact with wealth and fashion, his belief in the freedom of the common people had remained. That is why we find him supporting the American Revolution, but herein lies the great tragedy of Robert Burns. He had lost some of his freedom through the very means he had taken to secure it. It was to secure his own personal independence that he took service in the Excise. To "mak' siccar" at least against the extreme rigors of poverty for his wife and family, and thereby follow the muse in his leisure hours without fear or favor, that is why Robert Burns became a gauger.

And the rock of independence became the rock of serfdom. Every word spoken in sympathy with Washington and the American patriots; every word of sympathy spoken of the common people of France was a word spoken against the British government, his employers, who held control of his material destinies. Had he been worldly wise and a time-server, he would have remained silent. That was impossible for Burns. So he spoke out and there was more courage in the speaking out than he has ever received credit for. But the knowledge of the possible consequences curbed the force of his expression, and democracy's greatest voice was stifled at the moment when it was mostly needed. His independent mind oppression might bend but it did not subdue. By the time the Reform Movement had emerged convulsively from the embryonic stage Burns' race was nearly run. While the Reform leaders were being transported to Botany Bay he was at hand grips with poverty and symptoms of deadly disease, precariously holding house and home together and still writing immortal verse on £50 a year, even that being threatened. He had been poorer than that in his time. In the years when his father had to fight the same heart-breaking battle: "The piebald jacket let patch once more." He wrote to Graham of Fintry: "On eighteenpence a week I've lived before." That was not possible now with a wife and family to keep and knowing the nature of Burns, we must come to the conclusion that his poverty in the last years of his life lost Burns to the Reform Movement.

There hangs the tragedy of Burns.

Strange it is that of all the annual orations to the memory of Burns the patriot, Burns the poet of brotherhood, Burns the nature-lover, there should be a common conspiracy to becloud and belittle and hide the figure of Burns the Rebel.

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