

# Impressions of the Homeland

(By W. R. Dunlop)

We were anchored in Plymouth Bay close up to the historic old town on a glorious June day. The inevitable Scotch engineer from the tender came aboard the liner and, in friendly communicative mood, shewed me where Drake played his game of bowls and the spot whence the "Mayflower" sailed away to make American history. In such a setting, on such a day, Mac's homely burr seemed like the welcoming voice of Mother England.

Arrival in the old land after many years is more than a date and event. Perhaps with that thought, and as one who has lived long in two Dominions, I entered my name in Canada House and South Africa House, each within ear-shot of the other in the centre of the Metropolis—a symbol of the community which should subsist between members of the family.

I was curious to compare things new and old. Eight years had passed since the tense experience of war; and the interval was long enough to test the quality of reaction. As a casual observer I found nothing to indicate a recent cataclysm and little to distinguish social life from that which I knew thirteen years before, unless in point of excessive rates of railway travel and the amazing spread of the motor charabanc. There was perhaps less dignity in the pabulum of the London theatres; on the other hand less apparent drunkenness in familiar haunts, whether from a chastened spirit or economic pressure. The terrible coal strike had made its mark deep, how deep I did not care to gauge; and in mining districts it was pitiful, tragic, to see groups of husky men sitting on their haunches at street corners or by the roadside or idly playing cards on the grass while great industrial plants looked gaunt and lifeless from want of fuel. Yet it seemed a thing apart and, in London at least, did not disturb the surface of the stream to any outward appearance. There the main topic of the hour seemed to be the great Cricket tests, then in full course; and as I thought of that myriad sea of faces at Lord's, the tense restrained interest, the presence of the King, the extraordinary prominence given by the big London dailies in head lines and street boards, and the scraps of comment everywhere among passers by, I felt that Cricket at its best in England is more than a game—it is an expression of a National ideal, recalling to me Newbold's pen pictures and the proverbial word "It's Cricket." You cannot say a finer thing of public or private life—as an ideal.

I visited the House of Commons in some fear; for I had heard, with becoming sorrow, of the doings of some Scottish members in recent years. When I went it was a thin house and the big guns were not firing; but by coincidence it was a Scottish night—when the Secretary for Scotland was warding off a fusillade. Accent and idiom shewed here and there a lack in the niceties of classic speech; but neither word nor gesture lessened the traditions of dignity and authority we like to associate with the Mother of Parliaments, and I made a notch in my stick of remembrance.

The menace to St. Paul's Cathedral was grimly evidenced by the mighty scaffoldings rising away up into the great dome; and only about a third of the vast interior of the edifice was then open to view. I was told—I hope with reliance—that the menace seemed in control, with a few years of oversight yet ahead; and I breathed a sigh of relief, for the contingent thought was oppressive.

In the other national Valhalla—the venerable Abbey—I had a pleasant Canadian touch; for on the grave of Charles Dickens I noticed a beautiful memorial circlet of

flowers from the Toronto Dickens Fellowship, in silent homage. These two great temples seemed to represent different temperamental types of religious life: the Abbey in the thoughtful quietude of Westminster, and St. Paul's in the throbbing busy life of mixed humanity. A similar thought came to me as I stood in the heart of financial London: on one side the mighty Bank of England (now being altered); on the other the Mansion House with centuries of civic history behind it; converging streets and lanes representing untold financial power; and in the centre the dominating Royal Exchange with this arresting text on its noble facade, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof," like a prophet calling to the moving crowds below.

I cannot forget that memorable first visit to Abbotsford House with its stately front and feudal towers, its beautiful gardens, its velvet lawns sloping down to the gentle Tweed. As I looked, two mental pictures stood out before me: the one, that of a jovial host, a little lame, mingling with easy grace and courtesy among the distinguished visitors who had come from far and wide to do him homage: the other—in the writing room (kept just as he left it)—the picture of a man prematurely old, worn down but of heroic front, writing, writing himself to death in a noble effort to protect his name from even the shadow of dishonour. No one can visit that room and remain untouched. In fancy the spirit of the great Romancist seemed to follow me to the "ruined pride" of Melrose Abbey and its wondrous East window, to Edinburgh and Glasgow and the romantic shore of Loch Lomond, each of which has felt the virtue of his magic pen.

When in Scotland I was chiefly in Ayrshire and of course much among the bardic memorials, incidentally gaining new lore in Burnsiana by the Greek method of asking questions. Perhaps the most impressive of these visits was on that summer day when I stood on the top of the national memorial in Mauchline; below me the little village shewing Poosie Nancy's Inn in lettered prominence, calling up tumultuous thoughts of the Jolly Beggars, Auld Licht Armour, Jean, and Gavin Hamilton, the faithful friend; out in front the pastoral country and the hay fields in gay dress while, little more than a field away, lay Mossgiel—the real birthplace of the poet's genius—nestling among the trees. Irvine, where I pitched my moving tent, has many points of literary interest. It has a Burns Club, which has just passed its hundredth consecutive year. The Club treasures the original MSS. of "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "The Holy Fair," and other poems kept in a strong room of one of the banks with a jealous care like the guarding of the Scottish Regalia. By virtue of friendly passwords I was admitted to see the precious Manuscripts and was able to resolve the doubt on a controversial line. Burns was resident in Irvine about nine months, and for special reasons I was deeply interested in the little causewayed Vennel where he lodged and in the shop or shed behind, where with his partner Peacock he heckled the flax. James Montgomery, "the Christian poet," was born in Irvine in 1771 in the street which now bears his name, and he was therefore within the period of Scottish Renaissance which bloomed so brilliantly a few years later in Edinburgh. Irvine claims also John Galt, born there in 1779, author of "Annals of the Parish" and incidentally the founder of Guelph in Canada. In more modern days Robert Mantell, the distinguished American actor, was born in