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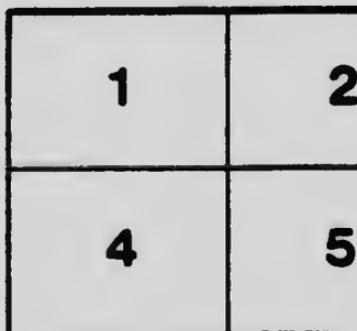
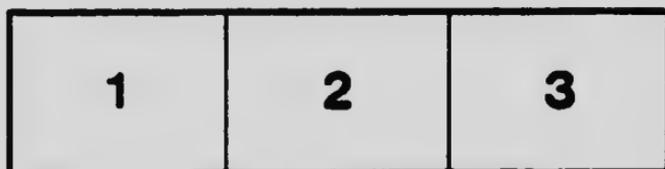
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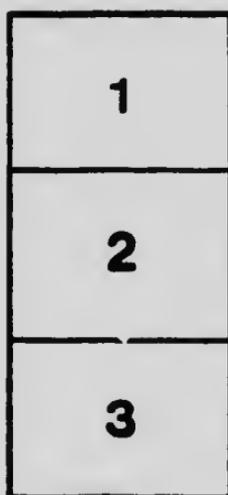
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ROBERT BURNS

As Thinker, Poet
and Seer

By
C., FORT ROUGE

*"The... it's law or bigot's ban
More mighty is your simplest word,
The free heart of an honest man,
Than crozier or the sword"—WHITTIER.*

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To James Hillhouse. Esq.

In grateful recollection of the many pleasant and profitable hours we have spent together in the interchange of thought concerning the great poet and great man of whom these pages treat, I inscribe them, my trusty friend, to you.

C.

*Fort Rouge,
Winnipeg, October, 1913*

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Robert Burns and the Scottish People



It will ever redound to the credit of the Scottish people that they are united together by their gratitude and affection for their national poet. Not only by birth and parentage was Robert Burns a Scotchman, but also in sensibility and temperament. He shared all the better qualities of the Scotch and of the best type of the Scotch at that.

Not only was he a poet, but beyond and above that he was a thinker and a seer; and was gifted with the faculty of giving that vivid and forcible expression to his thoughts that has thrown around the memory of all that he was and all that he did the enduring rampart of Immortal Fame.

His genius was the gift of heaven, but the application of it, that is, the use to which he put it, arose from circumstances that were induced by the changeful conditions of his life and by qualities which he had inherited from a long line of sane and healthy men and women who were his ancestors.

They are a wonderful people, the Scotch. Mingling with them in every-day life soon makes you aware that as a rule they take more pleasure out of life than most other peoples are able to do, and that, with all their prejudices and foibles, their faults and their failings, you can't help liking them. One strong point with them is the capability of going straight to the heart of whatever task they take in hand.

The canny Scot who plods along life's pathway with but little outward show of the interest he takes in what he is about gets there just as surely, and very often as soon, as his breezy and fussy, generous and impulsive compatriot who appears to carry everything before him with a rush. To understand and appreciate the Scotch rightly we have to know both these types. Between them and because of them the Scotch nation has made itself famous, and Scotchmen have distinguished themselves in every walk of life. The plodding quality, as well as the rushing quality, is blended together in the best type of Scotchmen, and consequently we have become accustomed to the expression, "The Irrepressible Scot."

The Scotch Predominate

The first places in our legislature, at the bar, in the pulpit and in the world of commerce and industry are, strange to say, taken by representatives of this hardy northern race which, as Micawber said, has its habitation ayont the Tweed.

There is a colloquialism which has it, "Tak' awa' Aberdeen an' twal' mille roon an' far are ye?" No doubt the people of the "braif toon" could, and from what I know of them would, give a good account of themselves in answering the question. Since they could conjure with the almost ubiquitous alumni of an ancient university and could count amongst their following such names as Byron and

Beattie, Bain and Ferrier, we may safely leave it to the sons of Bon-Accord to look after themselves. We might put an almost similar question, however, with reference to the influence of the Scotch and the infusion of Scottish blood in this new empire.

The Scotch and the Canadian

There is much of the Scotch in the Canadian. He shows it in his downrightness, and in his impatience with all merely artificial impediments to progress.

If we could annihilate the work the Scotch have done in the Dominion of Canada where would she be amongst the nations today? The right answer to such a question is, very likely in the same place. The development of nationality arises from many other causes than purely racial ones, and what has been done would very likely have been done anyway, if not by Scotchmen by some other race, but all the same the position as it actually stands is a tribute to the constructive ability of the Scottish people.

As we have said, Burns was of the best type of Scotchman, and one of the best of his type. He was possessed of all the virtues, and, let us admit, also some of the vices of his race.

It is not our intention in these pages to give even the briefest outline of the life of Robert Burns. Many biographies have been written of him, most of them with great care and labor, but none of them gives so luminous and vivid a picture of the poet and the man as he has given of himself in his own writings.

Burns' Outlook On Life

It is because his outlook on life, and the spirit in which he tackles the great life problems of his time, may be of some service and value to us in these latter days, that I think I have something to say about Burns which needs to be emphasized to the men and women of this generation.

One of the Great Men of His Time

Of the mere details of his life perhaps enough has been said; many things trifling in themselves, and having but little bearing on his attitude towards life's problems, have been preserved and are still recorded with painful elaboration. What is wanted today is a picture of the man as he was, and an appreciation of all that tends to make him the name and the power he is, not only with his own countrymen, but with thinking men and women throughout the world today. It is a superficial view, but also a very popular misconception that Burns was merely an ordinary plowman who had the faculty of stringing rhymes almost spontaneously, and the man in the street has ever so many stories to tell and examples to give of his readiness in this respect. It needs to be said now as much as ever it did that Burns was not only a great poet, but also a great man. He was a philosopher and a thinker in the first place, and chose a metrical form of expression just because it suited his temperament best.

Although from his earliest years he had to dwell amongst the humblest objects it is clear from his poems, but clearer even than in them in his prose writings, that he had a mind capable of rising into the region of great ideas. What strikes us most in his letters is that, although in form they appear to be in conformity with a style that is not his own, they still reveal the clearness and vigor of what may be termed his strictly intellectual qualities and perceptions.

His preference for poetry as a form of expression seems to have arisen as we have said from his impassioned and enthusiastic temperament.

His Education

One thing that gives Burns a pre-eminence over the notable men of his time is the fact that in his earlier years he was unfettered by the conventions of the ordinary college curriculum. That bane of many a poetical and aspiring youth did not fall upon him. No University can claim him as one of its alumni. He was educated in a better school, namely, the school where your own initiative and your own desire is taken into account in determining what you are to learn, and how you are to learn it, and why. I know there are biographers of Burns who consider this lack of a college education as a defect, and there has been much speculation as to what would have been the result if he had been sent to college and properly educated. Without the least desire to disparage the benefits generally to be derived from a college training, let us at once recognize that for a man of Burns' capacity and temperament such a method would have been to him unbearable and unnecessary. Those who still cling to the illusion that there is some mythical or talismanic power in what is usually termed a classical education will do well to consider what Prof. Huxley has to say of it. Writing in the year 1868 (very likely we have improved it somewhat since then, but it must have been much worse in the days when Burns was in his early manhood). Huxley said:

"It means getting up endless forms and rules by heart. It means turning Latin and Greek into English, for the mere sake of being able to do it, and without the smallest regard to the worth or worthlessness of the author read. It means the learning of innumerable, not always decent, fables in such a shape that the meaning they once had is dried up into utter trash; and the only impression left on the boy's mind is that the people who believed such things must have been the greatest idiots the world ever saw. And it means finally, that after a dozen years spent at this kind of work the sufferer shall be incompetent to interpret a passage in an author he has not already got up, that he shall loathe the sight of a Greek or Latin book, and that he shall never open or think of a classical writer again."

We may well thank our stars that poverty as well as the want of inclination preserved our poet and man from being immersed in such a disaster to himself and to us. Evidently the poet himself saw something of the effect it would have, for we find him saying on almost the same subject—

A set o' dull, conceited hashes,
Confuse their brains in college classes!
They gang in stirks, and come out asses,
Plain truth to speak;
An' syne they think to climb Parnassus
By dint o' Greek!

With him it was not by "dint o' Greek" that Parnassus was to be climbed. "Ae spark o' Nature's fire" was enough for the poetry that was to touch the heart.

The star that rules my luckless lot,
Has fated me the russet coat,
An' damned my fortune to the goat;
But in requit,
Has blest me wi' a random shot
O' countra wit.

This while my notion's ta'en a sklent,
 To try my fate in guid black prent;
 But still, the mair I'm that way bent,
 Someth'ng cries "Hoolie!
 I rede you, honest man, tak' tent!
 Ye'll shaw your folly.

"There's ither poets much your betters,
 Far seen in Greek, deep men o' letters,
 Ha'e thought they had ensured their debtors,
 A' future ages;
 Now moths deform in shapeless tatters
 Their unknown pages."

There is terrible satire in those last two lines—gentle no doubt, but all the more exquisite just because of its gentleness. The men who grubbed on Greek themselves have their works enjoyed by the moths; that is how time avenges itself.

But it must not be thought that Burns was uneducated. He was as much of a philologist as he wanted to be; and besides, a list of the books with which he was acquainted shows that he was much better educated and immeasurably more intelligent than most young men of his time.

When he was sent to Ayr to revise his English grammar under Dr. McMurdoch, the works he took with him included "Fenelon's Telemaque," "The Life of Hannibal," "The Life of Wallace," "The Spectator," "Pope's Homer," "Lock's Essay on the Human Understanding," "Allan Ramsay's Works" and "Shakespeare's Plays." Thomson's and Shenston's Works he had also studied, and his present to a friend of Deloime on the Constitution shows that he had studied politics as a branch of science and not as a mere party shibboleth, as has been done by so many both in his day and in our own.

Where are the young men, even in our own day, when we enjoy such a plethora of literary achievement, who can boast of a similar acquaintance with the masters of art and philosophy in so wide a field? Whether they have been to the University or no, there are indeed but few who can claim such a record.

The 18th century may be said to have been a tragic century so far as its closing years were concerned. It witnessed the upheaval by the French people in the First Revolution; the American War of Independence was also an event of world-wide significance. It is interesting to look back upon it, if for no other reason than to recall some of the great men who were upholding the banner of Scottish literature in such a conflicting period.

Burns and Hume

There are three names who have come down to us, and who may be said to stand out conspicuous, for the trenchant character of their contributions to the problems of their time. Those names are Adam Smith, David Hume and Robert Burns. To these three the human problem assumed a phase in which it had never appeared before. The writing of the French encyclopaedists had torn away the method of treating of human affairs according to the dictates of plenary or any other brand of inspiration. Human need and human possibility were enough for them. It is because they adopted such a basis for their enquiries that their contributions to the discussion are amongst the few things that are really alive today. Adam Smith still looms large in the sphere of economics and students of political economy are fond of referring to him as the founder of their science. I always think of these great Scotchmen together, but

more particularly of Burns and Hume. Although the circumstances of their lives differed greatly, Burns immersed in a hopeless struggle with poverty, Hume moving in the best circles and withal tolerably comfortable so far as worldly gear is concerned, yet, in their outlook on life and in the subjects which claimed most attention in their thoughts they had much in common.

The philosopher and wise man and the poet and husbandman agreed in peace of mind, in a liberty and independence of fortune and in a contempt for riches, power and glory. Both Burns and Hume seem to have been gifted with that best of all heaven's blessings, a strong sense of humor and a cheerful disposition. But more than all that, both of them were laying down principles of thought and action touching the heart and core of everything that really matters in life. Hume called himself a sceptic; Burns did not, yet all that he has written might have as wide an acceptance supposing he had kept continually before him an advice which Hume lays down at the conclusion of one of his essays—

"If we take in hand any volume, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and experience? No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

The Stuff of Which Life Is Made

Burns was a poet and a seer and from his point of view in order to bring men within the range of his influence he had to touch their heart's affections, as well as to convince them of the truth of the message he had to deliver. A writer has said, "That poetry is the stuff of which life is made." If that is so, Burns was the greatest man of the three, for his book contains it all.

Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hate is poetry, contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, disdain and madness are all poetry, and all of them are to be found in the writings of Robert Burns.

Burns, Schiller and Goethe

Half a century ago it would have been thought absurd to mention the name of Burns alongside that of Hume, or alongside even the name of Schiller or Goethe. There is no such feeling in regard to him and his book now. His place amongst the thinkers and philosophers of his time is no longer the subject of doubt or discussion. It is true that his language is not, except in his prose writings, logical and deductive like Hume's, nor does he contrive to put his thoughts into great epical conceptions like Schiller or Goethe, but he treats of the greatest of all themes nevertheless. He was none the less a poet and a thinker that he sometimes puts more meaning into a couple of stanzas than other poets can put into a whole drama—nor is he the less of a thinker because he speaks to the common people in their common language.

Undoubtedly there is this in the relationship of Burns and the common people, whether they be Scotch or for that matter of other nationalities—the people love him. They have taken him to their heart. The same cannot be said of any other poet or thinker whatsoever. France has its Rousseau and Victor Hugo, but to the present generation of Frenchmen their works are a dead letter, and anything they may have said has no place in the memory of the French abroad. Except to students of the classics, Shakespeare might be a Frenchman or one of the ancient Romans, for all that the average Englishman knows or cares. Swedes and Norwegians have their Ibsen and their Bjornson, but it is rare to meet with one of their

countrymen who know anything of the writings of those dramatists and poets. Germany can boast of Schiller and Goethe, but the average German knows little or nothing of who Schiller or Goethe were and could not quote any of their writings, although they both hold a high place still in the literary world, and the Germans as a rule are an intelligent people. Some people have an idea that the Germans are a dour and disgruntled lot, but really they are nothing of the kind. I used to live almost next door to the "German Club," and their convivial gatherings I can bear testimony were both frequent and hearty. One of the most amusing episodes at the break up of most of those gatherings was their attempt to put the necessary pathos and vim into the singing of "Auld Lang Syne." It is a great tribute to the presence of Burns and goes far to account for his power and influence amongst the people, that he put the greatest thoughts into the commonest language. "Auld Lang Syne" is Scotland's song of peace, just as "Scot's Wha Hae" is her song of war, but "Auld Lang Syne" is the rallying and uniting song and will be sung as long as any dialect of our common language is attempted to be spoken. I surely do not need to quote it. The complete words of it are worth looking up. They are so beautiful and so full of a pathos that all can appreciate. The outstanding feature about Burns, however, at the time of which I write, was that he struck out a line for himself.

Although the other great writers that had immediately preceded him succeeded in attracting the eyes of all Europe to the rugged rocks and mountains of Scotland, there was nothing about their works that was essentially Scotch. As we have said they were all more or less tainted by the "red fool fury of the Seine."

His Patriotism

Burns adhered to his own country and set himself to deal with the universal life problems as they affected his own people.

He also fearlessly adopted as the theme for his muse the commonest of domestic objects and faced the questions that were agitating the public mind through the treatment of them. Never did the love of country burn with a warmer or a purer flame than it did in the heart of her Plowman Bard—as he says himself, and the feeling was an obsession with him.

Even then a wish (I mind its power,
 A wish that to my latest hour
 Shall strongly heave my breast—
 That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,
 Some usefu' plan or heuk co'd make,
 Or sing a sang at least.

The rough hurr-thistle, spreading wide
 Among the bearded bear,
 I turned the weed's clips aside,
 And spared the symbol dear:
 No nation, no station,
 My envy e'er could raise,
 A Scot still, but blot still,
 I knew nae higher praise.

The spirit of revolution was abroad. In France it became acutely political, in Scotland it became religious. She had thrown off the trammels of Romanism, but now she was becoming beset with a Protestantism that was assuming a tyranny as irksome to religious freedom, and therefore to religion itself, as Romanism had ever been.

It would have been impossible for a man of Burns' perceptions to hold aloof from a controversy that for the time being assumed so momentous a shape to his country.

She had for long been hag-ridden by a theology that waxed sour and pestifential, vitiating the hope and stifling the breath of life in her people. To anyone holding the broad and generous view of human destiny both here and hereafter that Burns entertained, to enter on such a fight was the highest purpose to which he could devote his powers. He turned on this hotbed of cant and hypocrisy the full force of his satire—he held them up to ridicule in "The 'Twa Herds," "The Holy Tulzie," "The Ordination" and "The Holy Fair." Sometimes he pours forth his indignation—as thus:

But I gae mad at their grimaces,
Their sighin', cantin', grace-proud faces,
Their three-mile prayers, an hauf-mile gra^{as},
Their raxin' conscience,
Whase greed, revenge, and pride disgraces
Waur nor their nonsense.

On Politics and Religion

To Burns both politics and religion were serious things, and it is little wonder that a man gifted with so keen an insight and so intense and sensitive a nature should have felt a strong repugnance at the insincerity with which he was surrounded, both in politics and religion. The only thing he could do was to open the floodgates of his irony and sarcasm and pour forth ridicule and contempt on the cant and sham, the formalism and hypocrisy, with which he was continually coming in contact. He gives us many examples of it. "Holy Willie's Prayer" is one, but here is another which cuts both ways—it commends the good while it condemns the bad:

I readily and freely grant,
He downa see a poor man want;
What's no his ain he winna tak' it,
What ance he says he winna break it;
Ought he can lend he'll no refuse 't,
Till aft his guidness is abusèd;
And rascals whyles that do him wrang,
Ev'n that, he does na mind it lang;
As master, landlord, husband, father,
He does na fail his part in either.

But then, nae thanks to him for a' that;
Nae godly symptom ye can ca' that;
It's naething but a milder feature
Of our poor, sinfu' corrupt nature:
Ye'll get the best o' moral works
'Mang black Gentoos and Pagan Turks,
Or hunters wild on Ponotaxi,
Wha never heard of orthodoxy.
That he's the poor man's frier in need,
The gentleman in word and deed,
It's no through terror of d-mn-tion;
It's just a carnal inclination.

But the questions affecting Scotland were not confined to a mere religious controversy. When we read the poem of "The Twa Dogs" we find such verses in it as the following:

Cæsar.

I've aften wondered, honest Luath,
What sort o' life poor dogs like you have;
An' when the gentry's life I saw,
What way poor bodies lived ava.

Our Laird gets in his rackèd rents,
His coals, his kain, and a' his stents:
He rises when he likes himsel';
His flunkies answer at the bell;
He ca's his coach, he ca's his horse;
He draws a bonnie silken purse
As lang's my tail, whare, through the steeks,
The yellow-lettered Geordie keeks.

Frae morn to e'en it's nought but toiling
At baking, roasting, frying, boiling;
An' though the gentry first are stechin,
Yet even the ha' folk fill their pechan
Wi' sauce, ragoûts, and sic like trashtrie,
That's little short o' downright wastrie.
Our Whipper in, wee blastit wonner,
Poor worthless elf, it eats a dinner
Better than ony tenant man
His honour has in a' the lan':
An' what poor cot-folk pit their painch in,
I own it's past my comprehension.

Luath.

Trowth, Cæsar, whyles they're fash't enough;
A cotter howkin' in a sheugh,
Wi' dirty stanes biggin' a dyke,
Baring a quarry, and sic like,
Himself', a wife, he thus sustains,
A smytrie o' wee duddie weans,
An' nought but his han'-darg, to keep
Them right and tight in thack an' rape.

An' when they meet wi' sair disasters,
Like loss o' health, or want o' masters,
Ye maist wad think, a wee touch langer,
An' they maun starve o' cauld and hunger;
But, how it comes, I never kenned it,
They're maistly wonderfu' contented;
An' buirdly chiels, an' clever hizzies,
Are bred in sic a way as this is.

Cæsar.

Rut then to see how ye're negleckit,
How huffed, and cuffed, and disrespeckit!
Lord, man! our gentry care as little
For delvers, ditchers, an' sic cattle;
They gang as saucy by poor folk,
As I wad by a stinking brock.

I've noticed, on our Laird's court-day,
 An' mony a time my heart's been wae,
 Poor tenant bodies, scant o' cash,
 How they maun thole a factor's snash;
 He'll stamp an' threaten, curse an' swear,
 He'll apprehend them, poind their gear;
 While they maun stan', wi' aspect humble,
 An' hear it a', an' fear an' tremble!
 I see how folk live that hae riches;
 But surely poor folk maun be wretches.

The poet was fully alive to the evils of landlordism as it appeared to him; he knew only too well, for he had experience in the case of his own father of what was meant by "poor country bodies."

His Sympathy With the French People

Nor was his patriotism a mere piece of parochialism. He looked out on the world with the eyes of a man and saw things in their natural colours and in their natural relations. He expressed his sympathy with the French people in their struggles, and also declared for the principles of the first French Revolution 50 years before any other man in Europe had the courage to do the same.

He was a Republican, and it was harder to be a Republican in the 17th century than it is to be a Socialist in the 20th, more particularly in the case of Robert Burns, for he was a government servant and was not supposed to have any political opinions. The consequence for him was that he had to eat humble pie and make profession of loyalty to the ignoble house of Hanover, whose members he, in common with most people of any intelligence, despised and disliked. He was true to the people's cause, as it presented itself to his day and generation.

Nothing is more common to hear than the expression—Robert Burns was a Socialist; and attempts have been made to read politico-economy into his writings and the writings of Shakespeare as well. Such a method is not to be commended. Burns fearlessly and courageously adjusted himself to the questions of his day.

His Ideal of Humanity

If we are to benefit by his example let us do likewise in regard to the questions of our day. Republicanism as a form of government had not been tried in Burns' time. Now we have had some experience of it. It has taken us some time to learn that it is possible to have a city like Paris, where there are people leading miserable lives in poverty and destitution side by side with others living in opulence and wealth, under a Republic just as it was under the old race of kings. In free and independent America we can still point to such contrasts, as may be seen in such cities as Pittsburgh, Chicago and New York. The man of sense and spirit will not ask, "Was Robert Burns a Socialist?" The question for him is the more important one, "Am I a Socialist?" All the same, Burns was far in advance of his time. He saw quite clearly that throughout the world men were toiling and molling to support the wealthy and the powerful. But at the same time he saw clearly that the "pith o' sense and pride o' worth" are beyond all the dignities a king can bestow, and he looks to the time when class distinctions would cease and the glory of manhood be the highest earthly dignity. His ideal for humanity takes the form of an intercession in the song, "A Man's a Man for A' That":

Then let us pray that come it may,
 As come it will for a' that,
 That sense an' worth o'er a' the earth
 May bear the gree for a' that.
 For a' that an' a' that
 It's comin' yet for a' that,
 That man to man the world o'er
 Shall brithers he for a' that.

There is no trace of the "darned furriner" here; it is significant that the poet saw that such an ideal was impossible for Scotland alone or even for Britain alone, but must include "man the world o'er." Of course it has been argued that such an ideal as the Brotherhood of Man is Utopian and at best hut a piece of mere sentiment. This is more or less true of every ideal. Plato's Republic had to be conceived without the poets in it lest their description of the natural man should spoil his mechanical man, who was supposed to live without giving expression to his thoughts and feelings. "More's Utopia" and Morris's "News from Nowhere" are Utopias, and impossible in our day and generation just because human nature is what it is. Still it is necessary for us to have ideals as the goal towards which our efforts in life may be directed. If it is impossible for us to live up to them that is no reason why we should not come as near them in our life as possible.

To be perfectly virtuous is impossible, but surely that is no reason why we should not be as virtuous as possible. To recognize in our dealings with one another that all men are brothers is as good a rule to guide us in our social relationships as any that I know of. It helps us now and here—and makes for the possibility of a better life for all as we proceed in this. After all the future has to grow out of the present.

Much speculation has been indulged in regarding what was Burns' religious convictions. Carlyle, Emerson and Walt Whitman, Lowell and Whittier are counted amongst what are termed Transcendentalists, because they renounced the helief in a personal devil, and would have nothing to do with rewards and punishments as being part of the Gospel. Burns' "Address to the De'il," a matchless piece of humour, produced such an effect by its pawkie wit and telling points that the helief in the personality of that important functionary in Scottish theology was never again so implicitly accepted by the people. Today the devil has entirely disappeared even from the pulpit. We are a ghost and an illusion the poorer, but our conception of the religious life is richer and purer without the presence of his sable majesty.

The poet also sums up the situation in regard to rewards and punishments in his "Epistle to a Young Friend." In this poem also there are several touches which show that besides dealing with the theological and popular aspect of the question, he also had been doing some thinking on the position set forth by Hume, who, when dealing with the question of the moral consciousness — or what Carlyle rather sneeringly calls "The Natural History of Religion," lays it down that "Morality must mean simply what other people feel about my conduct." "Actions are not approved because they are moral; they are moral because they are approved." The poem proceeds—

I'll no say men are villains a';
 The real, hardened wicked,
 Wha ha'e nae check but human law,
 Are to a few restricted:

But och, mankind are unco weak,
An' little to be trusted;
If self the wavering balance shake,
It's rarely right adjusted!

Yet they wha fa' in fortune's strife,
Their fate we should na censure,
For still th' important end of life
They equally may answer;
A man may ha'e an honest heart,
Though poortith hourly stare him;
A man may tak' a neebor's part,
Yet nae ha'e cash to spare him.

Aye free, aff han' your story tell,
When wi' a bosom crony;
But still keep something to yoursel'
Ye scarcely tell to ony.
'Conceal yoursel' as weel 's ye can
Fra critical dissection;
But keek through every other man,
Wi' sharpened, sly inspection.

The sacred lowe o' weel-placed love,
Luxuriantly indulge it;
But never tempt th' illicit rove,
Though naething should divulge it:
I wae the quantum o' the sin,
The hazard of concealing:
But och! it hardens a' within,
And petrifies the feeling!

To catch dame Fortune's golden smile,
Assiduous wait upon her;
And gather gear by every wile
That's justified by honour;
Not for to hide it in a hedge,
Nor for a train attendant;
But for the glorious privilege
Of being independent.

Whittier, who was an assiduous student of Burns, but who was a more pronounced religionist than ever Burns was, reproduced almost the same thought in the following stanza:

"The stern behests of duty,
The doom books open thrown;
The heaven ye seek, the hell ye fear,
Are with yourselves alone."

It would be hard to place Burns among any section of religionists. With him conduct counted for much, belief for almost nothing at all. His position could be comprehended under Matthew Arnold's famous dictum, "Conduct is three-fourths of Life."

The Modern Reformers

Truths are truths singly, and must be accepted as such, whether they fit into the framework of any ism or not. Every ism is a species of Fanaticism, and the trouble with every popular movement and with the modern reformer is that they mingle the great

"A few seem favourites of fate,
In Pleasure's lap caressed;
Ye., think not all the rich and great
Are likewise truly blest.
But, oh! what crowds in every land,
Are wretched and forlorn!
Through weary life this lesson learn,
That man was made to mourn.

"Many and sharp the num'rous ills
Inwoven with our frame;
More pointed still we make ourselves
Regret, remorse, and shame!
And man, whose heaven-erected face
The smiles of love adorn,
Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!

"See yonder poor, o'erlaboured 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.

"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 subject to
His cruelty or scorn?
Or why has man the Will and Power
To make his fellow mourn?

"Ye: but not this too much, my son,
Disturb thy youthful breast;
This partial view of humankind
Is surely not the best!
The poor, oppressed, honest man,
Had never, sure, been born,
Had there not been some recompense
To comfort those that mourn.

"O Death! the poor man's dearest friend—
The kindest and the best!
Welcome the hour my aged limbs
Are laid with thee at rest!
The great, the wealthy, fear thy blow,
From pomp and pleasure torn;
But, oh! a blest relief to those
That weary-laden mourn!"

Shakespeare and Scott and the Working Class

It is noteworthy as a criticism of purely literary significance and it is also remarkable as a picture of the life conditions of their times, that both Shakespeare and Scott, whose object in writing was merely pecuniary gain, in treating of the lower classes almost always represent them as if their only place in life was to be of service to their lords and masters.

Characters like Cuddle Headrigg and Gurth the Swineherd crowd the pages of Scott, notwithstanding that he was a legal functionary and astute man of affairs, and ought at least to have known that denuded of the artificial trimmings and trappings imposed by society and its laws, all men are by nature at least on an equality.

Shakespeare, who was never able to get rid of the "Divinity that doth hedge a king" in representing the working class in his plays, places them invariably on the stage in the position of dolts, slaves and serfs, and always bearing titles and saying and doing things that are likely to excite ridicule and contempt.

It is tragic enough to think of the spectacle of Hamlet strutting about upon the stage, tearing his hair and declaiming, "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right"; or again,

"What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion,
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech;
Make mad the guilty, and appal the free."

The only thing that was out of joint within the horoscope of the impetuous and ineffective prince, and the only "motive and cue for passion" that he really did have was the "falling off" of a drunken and incestuous king, whose departure from the paths of virtue was to involve the sacrifice of several innocent persons who had little or nothing to do with his crimes.

Any scheme of social adjustment based on the life conditions depicted in the writings of those great men must necessarily involve that the mass of the people, as Shelley says:

"Should have to work and get such pay
As just keeps life from day to day
In their limbs as in a cell,
For their masters' use to dwell."

They do not differ at all from the champions and apologists of the social arrangement under which we now have to live—where a great mass of the population must necessarily be in the position of wage slaves—the hewers of wood and the drawers of water for the gods of creation.

The Problem for Burns

Of quite another character was the question which presented itself to the mind of Burns:

"If I'm design'd 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 subject to
His cruelty or scorn?
Or why has man the Will and Power
To make his fellow mourn?"

This question cannot now be regarded as a mere flight of poetical fancy. It must be taken as the statement of a problem in metaphysics. Like the true philosopher he was, he not only states the problem, but also by inference he has already put his finger on the spot and goes a long way to explain, if not to solve, it when he says that "Man's inhumanity to man, Makes countless thousands mourn." Those two lines declare what nearly two centuries of experience has proved to be a fact.

The Labor Movement

The only movement of our day that is at all analogous to the times in which Burns lived and wrote is the Socialist or Labor movement. From their point of view, or indeed from any rational point of view, the social system under which we live cannot be regarded as anything less than an example of man's inhumanity to man. It is a huge example of stupidity to begin with. When all could be well off, when all could live happily together, Nature providing in abundance for the needs of all, it cannot be looked upon as anything less than a piece of wanton perversity to live as we do.

This is true looking to the mass of things as they appear on the surface in industrial life, but it is also true in individual cases as well. Plenty of those in authority destroy their chances of being of service to their fellows by carrying out their little brief authority with too high a hand. But this is notable. Those who have taken note of the advanced movement for the past ten years must have observed that the main feature of it has been a series of disappointments. It has put men into public positions, into parliament and into public boards and little or nothing has been the result. Up to now we are pretty much as we were. We have yet to learn that however immaculate may be its reasoning, or however obvious the conclusion to which it may have been driven, every principle that is subject to human handling must partake more or less of human limitations.

Those who are eager, and who expect much of men and women who have been brought into the limelight, would do well to ponder over the last two verses of the poet's "Address to the Unco Guid":

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Though they may gang a kennin wrang,
To step aside is human:
One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving why they do it!
And just as lamely can ye maik
How far, perhaps, they rue it.

Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us,
He knows each chord—its various tone,
Each spring—its various bias:
Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.

An Example of Hero Worship

As an example of hero worship that is wholly beneficent in all its bearings, it is questionable if any literature, either ancient or modern, can show anything at all analogous to the place which Burns holds in the affection of the Scottish. Of course goody-good people hold themselves aloof from the Burns' cult and profess a standard of morality from which he is excluded, but he touches all that is best in the Scottish character for all that. The adhesion of people whose virtue consists so largely in negations and abstentions, who profess so much and accomplish so little as our moral precisionists usually do, can easily be dispensed with.

Many reasons have been put forward as accounting for the moral and intellectual superiority of the Scottish people. Schiller attributes it to the rugged and wild scenery of their country, and to the familiarity of the people with Nature in all her moods. There is more than a grain of truth in this position. The balmy breath of summer or the hurricane that sweeps from her mountain peaks cannot fail to have an influence on the thought and sentiments of a people who survey them continually.

John Ruskin, as it appears to me, brings us nearer to the real reason when he says that the moulding of the Scottish character is due to the influence of two books. One of these is the Hebrew Scriptures, the other is the Poems of Robert Burns. He says the Scottish language is the most expressive and the most beautiful of all the Celtic languages and deserves to be acquired for the sake of its idioms alone.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that for three or four generations at least the two books referred to are to be found in almost every Scottish home, and when the young lad or lass strikes out to seek their fortunes abroad those two volumes are considered to be an indispensable part of their outfits. On the face of it there could be worse selections. As affording a broad view of human relationships there are not two books in the language better calculated to stimulate thought and quicken the perceptions. It is the fate of Burns, however, to be, like Shakespeare and Milton, or even the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, the victim of hyperbole. At home at any rate he is often quoted, but seldom read.

Those writings have been made a fetish of, and when anything is made a fetish of it ceases to be received with the same critical attitude that is extended to ordinary writings. It is true nevertheless that the writings of which I speak have so woven themselves into the warp and woof of our common speech that we quote them unconsciously. If we take away the idioms, the aphorisms, the axioms, and pat phrases that are attributed to these sources, where would our current English be?

There is every reason to believe that Burns is much more closely read by the Scot abroad than he is at home. Here is part of a letter which I was shown many years ago, written home to his mother by one who, if I were to mention his name, would go to show that he at least had cut some figure in the strenuous life of this Western country. When but a mere laddie he had left the auld clay biggen on the brae face. When he was living away out on the farm this is what he wrote home to his mother:

"Ye wis askin' if I ever wis lonely. Oh, weel! sometimes I am i' the lang winter nichts. Of coorse I read the 'People's Journal' fae en' tae en' aye, fan it comes; an' I read the Bible a lot: but, O me! the best o' a' is Burns. I'm sure I wad never ha'e thocht o' readin' them sae muckle if I'd been at hame. I can say the maist o' them by hairt noo. But for a' that ye can read them ower an' ower again an' aye see something i' them tae gar ye lauch or greet."

The Man and His Book

The Scot abroad is a different man from what he is at home. His imaginative and thinking faculties seem to become intensified, and he takes more kindly to the memory of his native land the further he is away from it. The reason for this is not far to seek. The monotonous though fertile plains of Manitoba are after all but a poor substitute for the hills and glens of Caledonia. The man of toil labouring in the summer's scorching heat or merely looking on when hoary winter sweeps the tractless prairie, cannot fail to grasp afresh the meaning and the power of such a work as Burns has given to

humanity. Apart altogether from the tragic incidents of his short life, and the interesting literature that has grown up around it, Burns' book is the best gift he has given us. He was surrounded all his life with the humblest and the commonest objects and such was the power of his genius that he glorifies whatever he touches. The farmer's old mare—the wounded hare—the field mouse and the mountain daisy receive at his hands the gentle touch that makes them immortal, without any of the elements of artistic pretension, such as we meet with in the poetry of Shelley or Shakespeare. We open this volume and find that there is not a thought of the mind or a joy or sorrow of the human heart but finds expression in it.

The teamster or the day laborer, the artisan or the mechanic, as well as the business man pursuing his equally sordid thoughtless laborious life in the office or warehouse, finds mental succour in it in this mercenary age. We all alike need something to remind us that life is more than food and raiment, more than buying and selling, more indeed than can be contained in an enforced day's work of any kind. We may safely turn to it if we wish to extricate ourselves from the thralldom of this selfish and pessimistic age.

Although touching the commonest things, many passages suggest the loftiest thoughts. There are few incidents or thoughts that touch us in the whole course of our spellbound existence that are not commemorated by his lyre in strains both sweet and bewitching. Now he pours forth his passion, now he doubts, now he hopes and fears, now he loves and hates; in pity and in anger alike he inspires us with a higher conception of human life and of ourselves as human beings.

His Consciousness of Power

About all his writings there is the consciousness of power; not only was he saying something great, but he knew that he was saying something great. Like every great man or great writer he was humble enough in sight of his great mission and before the standard of his own great genius, but he was self-conscious enough to know the service he was doing to his fellow men—otherwise he would not have done it at all. It was this along with his exalted patriotism that made the making of poetry with him its own exceeding great reward.

He was true to the muse and would only follow her for her own sake; he would not cudgel her nor force her by the allurements of personal or pecuniary gain. Many people, both in his own time and even up to now, believe that poetry poured from him of its own accord. He could write copiously and fluently when the fit was on him. As he says himself—

"The words come skelpin' rank an' file
A'maist afore I ken."

But there is every evidence that all his great efforts were the result of intense thought. One cannot help thinking of him, especially in his tour through the West Highlands, where many of his companions hung around him expecting to hear floods of poetry and song bursting from him at every turn, but it shows the difference between the true poet and the mere versifier, that he had his periods when he only thought and periods when he could write.

His Method in the Making of Poetry

Here is a little touch which incidentally throws some light on the poet's methods. A visitor to "The Burns country" writing in the "Gateway" thus describes Lincluden:

"While we were on the Maxwellton side of the river we made the walk of two miles or so to all that is left of Lincluden Abbey. The

Nith, flowing close by the river, between green tree-studded banks, is beautiful in every fold of its many windings.

"In a sheltered plateau between the abbey and the river a herd of cows cropped the short old turf in what must have been the nuns' garden, though there is a suggestion that it formed the base court of a Norman castle that stood on what is now a tree-covered mound immediately adjoining. From a dead level square the banks rose regularly on all four sides. With the abbey walls, the old trees and the murmuring river the lythe and lovely nook might well have been (as it was) a favoured haunt with Burns, distant though it is from both Dumfries (two miles) and the farm of Ellisland, four miles higher up the river.

"When Hew Ainslie, another Ayrshire poet, visited Dumfries before going to America, he asked Mrs. Burns to accompany him to some of the poet's haunts, and she with characteristic good nature threw a shawl about her shoulders and walked with him to Lincluden. As they stood on a sheltered and lovely spot (doubtless the terrace we have described) Mrs. Burns remarked: 'It was just here that my man often stood and I believe made up many a poem and song ere he cam' in to write it doon. He was never fractious—aye gude natured and kind baith to the bairns and to me.'"

And here is another which Mr. McDiarmid tells of with reference perhaps to his most exquisite poem, "To Mary in Heaven." His wife reported that it was written on the evening of the day three years that Mary had died. He appeared depressed and very sad about something, and wandered up and down gazing at the sky, which was very clear and starry.

At last, his Jean, who had been urging him to come indoors, found him lying on a heap of straw, with his eyes fixed on a very brilliant and beautiful planet; once more she entreated him to go into the house, and he complied, but, on entering, went at once to his desk and wrote (exactly as they remain) the exquisitely pathetic verses that gave words to his recent feelings.

Since no notice of Burns could be complete without it we cannot do less than quote it all:

Thou lingering star, with lessening ray,

That lov'st to greet the early morn,

Again thou usher'st in the day

My Mary from my soul 'as torn.

O Mary! dear departed shade!

Where is thy place of blissful rest?

Seest thou thy lover lowly laid?

Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast?

That sacred hour can I forget?

Can I forget the hallowed grove,

Where, by the winding Ayr, we met,

To live one day of parting love?

Eternity will not efface

Those records dear of transports past;

Thy image at our last embrace—

Ah, little thought we 'twas our last!

Ayr, gurgling, kissed his pebbled shore,

O'erhung with wild woods, thickening green;

The fragrant birch, and hawthorn hoar,

Twined am'rous round the raptured scene;

The flowers sprang wanton to be prest,

The birds sang love on every spray—

Till too, too soon the glowing west,

Proclaimed the speed of wingèd day.

Still o'er these scenes my mem'ry wakes,
 And fondly broods with miser care!
 Time but th' impression stronger makes,
 As streams their channels deeper wear.
 My Mary, dear departed shade!
 Where is thy place of blissful rest?
 Seest thou thy lover lowly laid?
 Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast.

The Annual Celebrations by the Scots Abroad

It is little wonder that year by year as the month of January comes round fresh preparations are made to give adequate expression to the admiration in which he is held and the gratitude with which his message is accepted.

Much more is made of "Burns' Day" by the Scot abroad than is the case at home. Of course the Old Country "Burns' Night" consisting of a concert at which first class artists are engaged is perhaps the only possible way to meet the popular demands. One is glad to find, however, out West that the celebrations take more and more the form of a convivial gathering at home, in the family circle. There are concerts, too, but they cannot be said to have attained a conspicuous success.

Some of the Presbyterian churches, where the Scotch element is known to predominate, have been in the habit of holding a "Burns' Night" about the end of January. It is to be feared, however, that the associations of the Church with its narrow and near-sighted conventionality does not blend well with the broad and tender sympathies that surround the memory that is sought to be commemorated.

At public dinners, suppers and other functions the comfortable and well-to-do citizens give utterance to plausible, though not always poetical, sentiments over the toast of the Immortal Memory. In the early days out West these functions were sometimes scenes of mirth and joviality which old-timers take a pleasure in recalling and will remember as long as memory lasts. The best way to celebrate Burns' day, however, is in the bosom of the family. Undoubtedly it is the way which comes nearest to the true inwardness of the thing and which would have commended itself to the poet himself.

To give some idea of what like these gatherings are and ought to be I cannot do better than quote the following conversation which took place between two teamsters hailing from the North Country in the stable on the morning after "Burns' Night." Bear in mind that this would be about January 26th and in Manitoba with the mercury hovering around 20 or 30 below the zero point:

"Od! she's sharp this mornin', Mac!" "Something awfu'." "Foo cam' ye on last nicht?" "O, rael weel! only the place wis terrible croodit, an' some o' the young chaps were raehter noisy; especially when it wis 'She's Ma Daisy' or 'Stop yer Ticklin'." "Did they sing that at a Burns' Night?" "O, aye; I suppose they thocht onything wad dae i' this country. But foo cam' ye on yersel'?" "O! we had a gran' nicht o't. There wis a haggis an' taties biled i' their jackets, an' bannocks bakit on the girdle; an' we sang 'Rantin' Rovin' Robin' an' 'Duncan Gray' a' thegither. A'budy hid tae dae something; yon blacksmith chap wis there wi' his fiddle, an' there wis a young fellow there comin' oot for a minister, an' he keptit up the fun till it was weel intae mornin' afore I cam' awa'. He read 'Tam o' Shanter' an' the 'Cottar's Saturday Night.' An' there wis anither chap there that read the 'Haggis.' I assure you we hid a swell time. The auld man took's ben tae the kirk an' twa-three times an' gaed's a nip. I couldna help lauchin' at the young minister: he didna come

ben, but he lookit as gin he kent brawly fat we were daein', an' I heard him say tae the chap that read the 'Haggis,' 'Dinna tak' ower muckle noo; it's nae guid for ye.'" "I wis' I had been bidden there tae. Of coorse the concert wis a' richt, an' the dance aifter 't, but it wisna like hein' at hame. Ye wad never ha'e kent it wis a Burns' Nicht frae onything that was deen, except a lassie that sang 'The Lea Rig.'"

That affords a pretty fair picture of how Burns' Nicht is celebrated out West. There is one gratifying feature about the celebrations which is significant of much. They take more and more the character of a celebration, and year by year the enthusiasm is growing.

His Poems

It has been said of Burns that admiration grows in proportion as we examine his qualities. To the Sco'ch men and women abroad he appeals much more intensely than to those at home.

Of his poems we can only add a word or two by way of pointing the moral and adorning the tale. His poetry is not the outcome of a pensive seclusion, he does not pour forth mere sentimental contemplations on objects that belong to the imagination alone. He rather gives all the vigour of his mind and all the happiness of his nature in exalting the pleasure to be derived from life itself just as it stood. With him the personal and the social are one and the same thing. He had no difficulty in claiming that men and women should be happy, just as the birds of the air or the flowers that deck the fields are happy. Take for instance his "Address To a Mountain Daisy":

Wee, modest, crimson-tippèd flower,
Thou's met me in an evil hour;
For I maun crush amang the stoure
Thy slender stem;
To spare thee now is past my power,
Thou bonnie gem.

Alas! it's no thy neebor sweet,
The bonnie lark, companion meet!
Bending thee 'mang the dewy weat!
Wi' spreckled breast,
When upward-springing, blithe, to greet
The purpling east.

Cauid blew the bitter biting north
Upon thy early, humble birth,
Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth
Amid the storm,
Scarce reared above the parent earth
Thy tender form.

The flaunting flowers our gardens yield,
High shelt'ring woods and wa's maun shield,
But thou beneath the random bield
O' clod or stane,
Adorns the histle stibble-field,
Unseen, alane.

There, in thy scanty mantle clad,
Thy snawy bosom sunward spread,
Thou lifts thy unassuming head
In humble guise;
But now the share uptears thy bed,
And low thou lies!

Thou saw the fields laid bare and waste,
And weary winter comin' fast,
And cozle here, beneath the blast
 Thou thought to dwell,
Till, crash! the cruel coultter past
 Out through thy cell.

That wee blit heap o' leaves and stibble
Has cost thee mony a weary nibble!
Now thou's turned out for a' thy trouble,
 But house or hault,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
 And cranreuch cauld!

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane
In proving foresight may be vain!
The best-laid schemes o' mice and men
 Gang aft a-gley,
And lea'e us nought but grief and pain
 For promised joy.

Still thou art blest, compared wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee.
But, och! I backward cast my e'e
 On prospects drear!
And forward though I canna see,
 I guess and fear.

The Greatness of Simplicity

In the domain of true art it is said that the true test of superiority is the nearness to which a representation comes to the objects or themes depicted. That is in reality its truthfulness and its harmony with Nature. It is the same in music and literature as it is in painting. All the greatest things in either of them are the simplest, just because it is by that means that their appeal comes home to all, gentle and simple alike. Any great work of art must not only depict what is to be seen or heard, it must at the same time convey something of the thoughts and sentiments, something of the inner sense and meaning of the thing if it is to touch human emotion at all.

The paintings of Rembrandt, the choruses of Handel are our immortal inheritance just because they fulfil this standard as nothing else in painting or music does. The same may be said of the poetry of Robert Burns. It goes straight to the spot like lightning to its quarry. It deals with natural objects, and it is not the beautiful and magnificent alone that we admire in Nature. The rudest or most uncouth objects are often closely connected with our finest and strongest emotions.

Take for instance, "The Auld Farmer's New Year Address to His Auld Mare."

When thou an' I were young and skelgh,
An' stable meals at fairs were dreigh,
How thou wad prance, an' snore, an' skreigh,
 An' tak' the road!
Town's bodies ran, an' stood abelgh,
 An' ca't thee mad.

When thou was corn't, an' I was mellow,
We took the road aye like a swallow:
At brooses thou had ne'er a fellow
For pith and speed;
But every tail thou pay't them hollow,
Whare'er thou gaed.

When frosts lay lang, an' snaws were deep,
An' threatened labour back to keep,
I gied thy cog a wee bit heap
Aboon the timmer;
I ken'd my Maggie wad na sleep
For that, or simmer.

In cart or car thou never reestit;
The steyst brae thou wad hae fac't it;
Thou never lap, an' sten't, an' breastit,
Then stood to blaw;
But just thy step a wee thing hastit,
Thou snoov't awa'.

It is questionable if there is such another poem on so common and so simple an object. Humour glances in every line of it. In pathos it amounts almost to a "psalm of life" both for the farmer and for the "auld mare." Although it depicts a life of industry, a life of work on the fields, which was then and is still the hardest kind of work, there is not one sordid word in the whole address. That phase which vitiates the whole of modern literature is noticeably altogether absent in the poetry of Burns.

His Epistles

In his epistles the poet also rises to a high pitch of his power, and is fully conscious of it. It is in them that he reveals most of himself. He lets himself go with all the familiarity which friendship warrants, and has something to say on most subjects. He was a hedonist, but had insight enough to perceive that both morals and emotions had to be taken into account in judging of human beings, that duty and pleasure in the complex nature of man and his surroundings had frequently to be taken as meaning one and the same thing. Taking them all in all there is no such poetry. It flows so swiftly and so sweetly, it rhymes and chimes so harmoniously at all points, that thought itself can do no more than keep pace with it. Especially is this so in the "Epistle to Davie," where the themes touched upon are the loftiest and the ideas put forward can be assimilated by the simplest.

While winds frae aff Ben Lomond blaw,
And bar the doors wi' driving snaw,
And hing us owre the ingle,
I set me down to pass the time,
And spin a verse or twa o' rhyme,
In hamely westlin' jingle.
While frosty winds blaw in the drift,
Ben to the chimla lug,
I grudge a wee the great folks' gift,
That live sae bien an' snug:
I tent less, and want less,
Their roomy fireside;
But hanker and canker,
To see their cursèd pride.

It's hardly in a body's power
To keep at times, frae being sour,
To see how things are shared;
How best o' chiels are whiles in want,
While coofs on countless thousands rant,
And ken na how to wair't:
But, Davie, lad, ne'er fash your head,
Though we ha'e little gear,
We're fit to win our daily bread,
As lang's we're hale and fier:
"Mair spier na, nor fear na,"
Auld age ne'er mind a feg,
The last o't, the warst o't,
Is only for to beg.

To lie in kilns and barns at e'en,
When banes are crazed and bluid is thin,
Is, doubtless, great dlistress;
Yet then content could make us blest;
E'en then, sometimes we'd snatch a taste
Of truest happiness.
The honest heart that's free frae a'
Intended fraud or guile,
However fortune kick the ba',
Has aye some cause to smile,
And mind still, you'll find still,
A comfort this nae sma';
Nae mair then, we'll care then,
Nae farther can we fa'.

What though, like commoners of air,
We wander out, we know not where,
But either house or hall?
Yet Nature's charms, the hills and woods,
The sweeping vales, and foaming floods,
Are free alike to all.
In days when daisies deck the ground,
And blackbirds whistle clear,
With honest joy our hearts will bound
To see the coming year:
On braes when we please, then,
We'll sit an' sowth a tune;
Syne rhyme till't, we'll time till't,
And sing 't when we hae done.

It's no in titles nor in rank;
It's no in wealth like Lon'on bank,
To purchase peace and rest;
It's no in making muckle mair;
It's no in books; it's no in lear,
To make us truly blest:
If happiness ha'e not her seat
And centre in the breast,
We may be wise, or rich, or great,
But never can be blest:
Nae treasures, nor pleasures,
Could make us happy lang:
The heart aye's the part aye,
That makes us right or wrang.

Those concluding two lines have been so often quoted and so variously applied that almost everybody knows them by heart. As an answer to those who in these days are so anxious to deride the purely intuitive character of our moral and emotional perceptions they have to be accepted as the result of experience. We can all testify that they are the declaration of a great and incontrovertible truth.

Truly if any man ever did so this man rose to the level of being the poet, the prophet and the seer of his people. Many a sermon has been preached upon both him and his poems. Listening to some of them we cannot get rid of the feeling that many people would never mention him at all except for the purpose of making him a peg to hang some of their senseless and superlative "illies upon.

It cannot be too often pointed out that, in order to write as he did, Burns had to be just the kind of man that he was. He lived the life that he wrote, and experienced the sentiment to which he gave expression. Had he been of the douce, decent, sober-minded type of his countrymen we never would have had those poems. On the other hand, if he had not written poems his vices would never have been heard of. He would have gone down to oblivion like so many others without having done anything even in the way of vice to call for special mention.

The Great Lesson His Life Has For Us

The great lesson that his life and writing ought to have for us is to teach us that in order to live happily we have to get into closer touch with Nature. Nature is the cosmic whole, and man is but a part of it. Our only hope of well-being is to live our life truly in harmony with the laws of our being. There are no little or common things in life. The things we touch and handle are really the sacred things. We have not got to go either to ancient legend or into the realms of prophetic vision for the basic principles of action in relation to our fellows. They lie all around us, and we are making for either good or ill in every action that we do and in every word that we utter. Instead of the self-centred and egotistic habits which unfortunately are the rule throughout our modern life, we ought to cultivate the finer feelings and give in our lives the expression of those hopes and sympathies that make man truly man. His songs live. They are immortal because every one is a bit of his soul. These are no feverish, hysterical jingles of clinking verse, dead save for the animating breath of music.

His Songs

Already we have quoted one of them which is exquisite and magnificent in its sweetness, but here is another which all critics agree is pleasing, first not only in his own collection, but also in any other collection of love songs, although Burns himself declares it to be one of his juvenile works—"Mary Morison."

O Mary, at thy window be,
It is the wished, the trysted hour!
Those smiles and glances let me see,
That makes the miser's treasure poor:
How blithely wad I bide the stoure,
A weary slave frae sun to sun,
Could I the rich reward secure—
The lovely Mary Morison.

Yestreen, when to the trembling string
The dance gaed through the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing—
I sat, but neither heard nor saw.

Though this was fair, and that was braw
And you the toast of a' the town,
I sighed, and said among them a',
"Ye are na Mary Morison."

O Mary, canst thou wreck his peace
Wha for thy sake wad gladly die?
Or canst thou break that heart of his,
Whase only faut is loving thee?
If love for love thou wilt na gi'e,
At least be pity to me shown;
A thought ungentle canna be
The thought o' Mary Morison.

As a piece of word painting the second verse of this song has often been referred to as unique in itself, but the last verse of the three we consider the most important, as it is exclusively with the affections of the heart.

Scotland has had many great men—she has had her warriors and her statesmen, her priests and her men of science, her literary men and her inventors, but none of them have done her sons and daughters the service that has been rendered to her by her plowman bard.

He appeals to us all; whether we be rich or poor, young or old, educated or simple, he deepens our sense of humour and evokes our strongest sympathies. We know each other better through the songs of our own sweet singer.

Now we have spoken of his gentleness, of his generosity, of his disinterestedness, of his kindness to man and beast. His aphorisms enter into the warp and woof of our common speech and he lives in us even though he be dead.

His Personality

Of his personality we will let others speak who knew him while he lived.

Ramsay of Ochtertyre, who was one of the best of judges, in one of his letters says:

"I have been in the company of many men of genius, but never witnessed such flashes of intellectual brightness as from him, the impulse of the moment, sparks of celestial fire."

Lockhart also who had the report of auditors, declared that Burns' conversation was the most remarkable thing about him.

During the visit of the poet to Edinburgh, where he was fêted by the best in the land, he was brought into touch with all the great writers and thinkers of his time. Hume was just newly dead, and naturally enough his life and writings were the subject of discussion amongst the learned of that day, as indeed they have been ever since.

Adam Smith's great book on the "Wealth of Nations" was then creating an interest both deep and wide, so that when we take into account the company and the subjects about which they conversed, we get some idea of the value which is to be attached to the estimate which his contemporaries have to give of his personality and conversational powers.

Mrs. Riddell's "Sketch of Burns"

In Mrs. Riddell's "Sketch of Burns," which appeared shortly after his death, she commences with the somewhat astounding statement that poetry was not actually his forte. Of course she admitted the excellence of his songs, and also fully subscribed to his power as a poet, but she spoke of the man as she had known him, and was

one of the first to assert that Burns was very much more than an uneducated peasant with a happy knack of versifying.

In the present day we hear too much of the inspired ploughman bursting into song, as one that could not help himself, and warbling of life and love in a kind of lyrical frenzy. The fact is that Burns was a great intellectual power, and would have been a force in any sphere of life or letters. All who have met him and heard him talk have insisted on the greatness of the man apart from his achievements in poetry. This is what Sir Walter Scott says of him in his reminiscences:

Sir Walter Scott's View of Burns

"I was a lad of fifteen in 1786-7 when he came first to Edinburgh, but had sense and feeling enough to be much interested in his poetry, and would have given the world to know him; but I had very little acquaintance with any literary people, and still less with the gentry of the West Country, the two sets that he most frequented. As it was, I saw him one day at the late Venerable Professor Ferguson's, where there were several gentlemen of literary reputation, among whom I remember the celebrated Mr. Dugald Stewart. Of course, we youngsters sat silent, looked and listened. The only thing I remember which was remarkable in Burns' manner was the effect produced upon him by a print of Bunbury's representing a soldier lying dead on the snow, his dog sitting in misery on one side, on the other his widow with a child in her arms.

"These lines were written beneath:

'Cold on Canadian hills or Minden's plain,
Perhaps that mother wept her soldier slain;
Bent o'er her babe, her eye dissolved in dew,
The big drops mingling with the milk he drew,
Gave the sad presage of his future years,
The child of misery baptised in tears.'

"Burns seemed much affected by the print, or rather by the ideas which it suggested to his mind. He actually shed tears. He asked whose the lines were, and it chanced that nobody but myself remembered that they occur in a half-forgotten poem of Langhorne's, called by the unpromising title of 'The Justice of Peace.' I whispered my information to a friend present; he mentioned it to Burns, who rewarded me with a look and a word, which though of mere civility, I then received and still recollect with very great pleasure.

"His person was strong and robust, his manners rustic — not clownish; a sort of dignified plainness and simplicity which received part of its effect perhaps from one's knowledge of his extraordinary talents. His features are represented in Mr. Nasmyth's picture, but to me it conveys the idea that they are diminished, as if seen in perspective. I think his countenance was more massive than it looks in any of the portraits. I should have taken the poet, had I not known what he was, for a very sagacious country farmer of the old Scotch school, i.e., none of your modern agriculturists who keep labourers for their drudgery, but the douce gentleman who held his own plough.

"There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments; the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large and of a dark cast, which glowed (I say literally glowed) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time. His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence, without the slightest presumption. Among the men who were the most learned of their time and country he expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least in-

trusive forwardness, and when he differed in opinion he did not hesitate to express it firmly, yet at the same time with modesty. . . .

"I never saw a man in company with his superiors in station or information more perfectly free from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment."

It is sometimes thought that merchant princes and globe-trotting millionaires have a better time of it than have the artists and the poets. On the surface it may appear so, but it is on the surface only. Burns' life was a short one, and judging by what he was able to accomplish it must also have been a busy one.

He experienced the full joy of living in the plethora of his literary compositions. When we take into account the friends he had, the companions he associated with, both male and female, by whom he was both valued and esteemed to the end of his days, the numerous generous acts he was able to do despite his poverty, we may truthfully say that he extracted more genuine pleasure out of every hour of his life than any mere mercenary worldling could ever be able to do.

Had the chastening hand of time been permitted to lay her finger on him he would not have had to battle, as he had to do all along with the passionate vehemence of youth, but would have borne his lot with that dignity and fortitude which comes from the consciousness that he had delivered his inspired message with that genuine regard for the promptings of a heart that had no vice in it, and that bore no malice.

He lived the noblest life that any poet ever lived. He wrote of the work and life of the fields which in many ways may be taken as man's natural element, and he lived the life himself. He fulfilled both the essentials of the heaven-sent poet—inspiration, truth, and seer. He had the lofty and serene brow of the thinker, and the roughened hands of the worker.

It is not uncommon to hear such expressions as "Poor Burns," or even "Poor Robbie" falling from people whose whole attitude towards life has no element of truth or sincerity in it, who live on mere appearances and on the surface of things all the time. To such people let us say: If it is within your power to admire or even to appreciate Burns, by all means do so; but pity, excuse or apology of any kind—he did not need them while he lived, still less does he need them now since he wears the laurel of the immortals, with an approbation that is fast becoming as wide as humanity itself.



