The Myth of Robert Burns.

By a curious and ironic twist of Providence, the 25th of January is marked with a double significance. In the calendar of the Christian Year it is set aside in remembrance of the conversion of St. Paul. In the calendar of the people of Scotland it is marked as the birth day of Robert Burns. It would not be merely an idle question to ask how many of those who honour this day for the birth of the Poet honour it also for the second birth of the Apostle. Indeed, if we were to pursue the speculation on these two notable anniversaries, it would not be difficult to argue that there is much in the character of the Scottish people which has emerged through the conflict of the Saint and the Inspired Paul of Tarsus with the Saint and the Inspired Burns. And it is certain that the life of the Poet himself can only be understood in the light of that conflict.

I have given this paper tonight the controversial title of "The Myth of Robert Burns." I realize, of course, that it is a title which would not be allowed in a Burns' Club. And I am personally very pleased that I am not speaking to such an organization. It is impossible for the devotees of any religion to look objectively at their faith; and this is particularly true of those who worship at the shrine of the Ayrshire Bard. It is doubtful if there has been any character in Scottish history - or in any other history for that matter - about whom men have so willingly suspended their critical faculties. For a great multitude of otherwise rational people, the cult of Robert Burns is taken as seriously as it is possible for a cult to be taken. He has become a mythical figure in the manner of the ancient gods, and tonight, all over the world, men and women are meeting in their yearly pilgrimage to the holy place.

Last week, when I was preparing this paper, I came upon two old and dusty volumes in the library of the University which fascinated me. The first was a bound volume called "The Burns Centenary," with the subtitle "being an account of the proceedings and speeches at the various banquets and meetings throughout the Kingdom, with a memoir and portrait of the Poet." And there, in
page after page of closely–printed type, are the
teritorial eulogies of the distinguished and the unknown
on the occasion of the Centenary of the Poet's birth.
Side by side with this book, on the same shelf, there
was another book: a collection of pamphlets on every
conceivable subject, ranging from "The Speech of Wm.
Bewitt, Esq., Q.C., M.P." to "The Chronology of the
Scriptures". And in this monument to forgotten causes
there was one pamphlet which caught my eye - a pamphlet
by the Rev. George Stevenson, Minister of the United
Original Seceders Church in Kilwinning, and published
on the very day of the Poet's centenary, with the
title: "Burns! Centenary: Are Such Honours Due To The
Ayrshire Bard?" I confess that as I read the opening
paragraphs of the minister's pamphlet I found myself in
considerable agreement with the author. He wrote: "...into
the general question of the propriety and advantages of
commemorative observances we do not at all enter; the
question we have now to determine, and to which we would
invite the serious attention of all who concur in the
celebration, not especially professing Christians, is
this: 'Is it right to lavish such honour on one who
though possessed of genius, prostituted it; whose writings,
principles, character and life, taken as a whole, are so
thoroughly unjustifiable and pernicious.'" There, if I
may say so, is the whole controversial question of the
myth of Robert Burns opened up, and the fat is most
decidedly in the fire!

It seems to me that the myth of Burns is double-
sided, like a gramophone record. And, like a gram-
ophone record, it can stand a lot of playing. First
of all, there is the myth of Burns the Saint. Burns the
noble and dignified representative of all that is worthy
in human life, the great champion of the common man, the
godlike ploughman of the pure heart and the unaligned
mind. And there is, second, the myth of Burns the Poet,
the great original, the unique genius, the only bard
Scotland ever produced, leaving altogether out of
account the minor poets of England such as Shakespeare
and Milton. It is this myth that I want to examine with
you tonight in both its parts: because I sincerely
believe that we are doing Burns an injustice which he
himself would probably have treated as a colossal joke
unless we try to see this man as he really was, and try
to estimate his poetry as it really is.
Burns the Man – what kind of man was he? Let’s try to look past the myth to the reality. I think Alan Dent, an Ayrshireman like myself, sums him up in a few well-chosen sentences: “Burns had many failings and freely confessed them. Among other things, he was an lecherous as a gosling. He treated his loves, the mothers of some of his children, abominably; and Jean Armour, whom he eventually married, showed perception as well as tolerance, when she exclaimed, even while adopting yet another of his stray offspring: “Our Robin should have had two wives.” Anyone who is familiar with Burns’ life story will not easily forget Mary Campbell and her child dying of typhoid in Greenock, waiting for a promised man who never came.

It is not at all my purpose to raise the ghosts of the sins of a man who is dead. But I am genuinely concerned when I listen – as I have often listened – to the popular Burns crony engaged in a usually maudlin attempt to clothe this very human man in the robes of saintliness. I do not think it is without significance that the Communist Party – where even the ordinary standards of morality are openly scouted and laughed out of court – have claimed Burns as their own.

There are others, of course, who do not go so far. They seek to find some excuse for his excesses anywhere except in the man. The most common refuge is to say that Burns was no more than a child of his time; and certainly Scotland in the 18th Century was not a land of godly piety, as some of our elders would lead us to believe. Ignorance and superstition were everywhere rife. In 1707 it was estimated that at least 10% of the people were professed beggars, either “gaberlunzies”, who begged by patent, or “thiggers and sorrows”, who demanded alms by menace. A great part of the population lived literally on the borderline of starvation. Till 1775 Scottish colliers and salters (thousands of men, women, and children) were slaves in every sense of the term. From that date they were no longer legally bought or sold, but they continued in virtually the same condition till June, 1792. The standard of morality in every section of the community was extraordinarily low, among rich and poor alike. Mrs Cowell, in her celebrated biography of the Poet, tells us of a drinking-match at which he was present at Friar’s Curse between Captain Kiddell and two other magistrates, “to determine which gentleman should be capable of last blowing a little cobby whistle, a
Scandinavian trophy which had many times changed hands on these terms. The three justices competed in strong clarret ... the gallant host was the first to disappear under the table after the sixth bottle. He was followed by Laurie, the parliamentary representative of Dumfries County ... the winner was Ferguson of Craigdarroch. He it was who now blew the whistle and passed out after his eighth bottle into triumphant oblivion. * Assuredly Burns lived in a time of slack morality: but to go the way of the world is never a mark of greatness.

There are others again who blame the Church for Burns' moral shipwreck. I think it was Stopford Brooke who first popularised the idea. He gave it as his opinion that if anyone is going to be called at the Bar of Judgment for the sins of Robert Burns it will not be Burns himself, but the ministers of Ayrshire. And this, of course, has been grist to the mill for the many Burns' lovers who are not conspicuous for their devotion to the Church. In fact, none of the atheistic Numinians I know still imagine that the Church today is the same as it was when Burns himself was made to sit on the three-legged stool of correction in Kilmarnock Kirk. There was much to deplore in the Church as Burns knew it. The rigorous moralism of the 'Auld Lichts', the hypocrisy of the 'Holy Willies', the unbending Calvinism of their doctrine were not calculated to make much appeal to one with the riotous nature of the poet. But it should be remembered that it was a person - Dr. Lawrie of Ayrshire, my own birth-place, incidentally, who befriended him and suggested his going to Edinburgh after the Kilmarnock edition of his poems was published in 1787.

There is the excuse made by Burns himself for his moral failings - the most illuminating of all. In a revealing stanza he writes:

I saw thy pulse's maddening play,
Wildly, with good pleasure's sanguine ray,
Misled by Juno's meteor ray,
My passion driven;
But yet the light that led astray
Was light from heaven.*

Or, as he puts it in a letter written from Edinburgh to Mrs Dunlop, speaking of his own failings: "he goes to a great unknown being who could have no other end in giving his existence but to make him happy; who gave him these passions and instincts, and well knows their force..." In other words, God made me what I am,
and it is His fault if I have strayed. Surely the very pinnacle of escapist and self-deception.

Burns the Man – alternating madly between moods of reckless exhilaration and passionate repentance, now filled with the most virtuous resolve to mend his ways, now writing in the language of a Dalek-shiner of his latest hazardous adventure, one day bemoaning with infinite tenderness over the uprooted daisy and the next in a roaring debauch with his Crocilian cronies in Edinburgh; Burns of the great heart and the weak resolve – here is no saint, but a man all too human, knowing his weaknesses and refusing to change it. There is little of nobility in the life of Robert Burns; there is much that is tragic. It is not ours to judge him. Neither is it ours to worship him for qualities he never possessed.

Burns the Poet – what is his place in the hierarchy of the great masters of verse? I sometimes wonder how many of the people who extol the merits of the poetry of Burns have read any other poetry, or really understand what they read of Burns. It seems to me that Burns is at his best when he is writing in the dialect which he habitually spoke, the dialect of Ayshire in the 18th Century. But suppose we took the first few lines of “Tam o’ Shanter”:

When Chapman billies leave the street,
And drouthy neighbours meet,
As market-days are wearing late,
And folk begin to tak the gate;
While we sit boozin’ at the nappy,
An’ getting fou and unce happy,
We think na on the lang Scots miles,
Be mosses, waters, slags, and styles,
That lie between us and our Hame ....

Now in these nine lines I imagine there are at least seven words which very few Scots today could understand. How many of us could say without a moment’s hesitation what a “shapen billy” is? Does “tak the gate” mean “go home” or “lock up for the night”? In “nappy” a drink or a tavern? What exactly is a slap? Frankly, I am personally totally unable to read Burns without an open glossary by my side. But that’s a small thing.
What of the poems themselves?

First of all, I believe that there are acres of his poetry which should never have seen the light of day, not only because it isn’t fit for the light, but because it is rank bad poetry. Such pieces as the “Ode to the Memory of Mrs Oswald”, or the “Ode to General Washington’s Birthday” are shockingly artificial poems. They are bombastic, insincere, and trivial. But then, even heer nodded.

BURNS’ greatness as a poet lay in three specific directions. First as a Patriot, he takes his place only after Pepys, Swift, Eyre, and Byron. And I doubt if there is anything in these giants of the art of satire to equal the biting, searing, flaming last stanzas of “Holy Willie’s Prayer”;

But Lord! remember me and mine
Wii’ mercies temporal and divine!
That I for grace an’ gear may shine,
Exelled by name;
And a’ the glory shall be thine!
Amen! Amen!

Second, as a Narrative Poet, he comes only after Chaucer; and in some ways “Tam o’ Shanter” is the greatest narrative poem in the language, or indeed in any language. Professor Recht of Göttingen, author of the last good book on Burns, says of this poem: “above all the horrors of Hell there rises radiantly triumphant the incomparable humour of the poet, who in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ has created a work in honour of his native place that for power of inspiration and perfection of execution is worthy to stand beside the best tales in the literature of the world.” I can remember my first reading of that poem – I couldn’t have been more than ten at the time – and my hair standing on end as I looked with Tam through the windows of the Alloway Kirk, and my heart pounding as I fled with him in the end race for the brig. Nor can I read it yet without recapturing that first tremendous thrill.

Finally, there are his Songs. Here is Burns at his supreme and incomparable best. Here is Burns refined from all the sordid baseness and licentious rhymes which narr
so much that he wrote. Here in the Songs I could almost
submit myself to the myth of Robert Burns. Here at least
in sincerity and tenderness and a great compassion and
a bewitching sadness and an irresistible appeal.

Had we never loved me kindly,
Had we never loved me blindly,
Never met, or never parted,
We had never been broken-hearted.

He knew that he was one of the greatest liars of lyric poetry ever written, and I suppose all he had to do was to talk
with him. I cannot imagine that there will ever be a more
perfect expression of the magnificent beauty of human love
ever put down on paper than The Andrews my John.

John Anderson, my John,
When we were first engaged,
Your looks were like the moon,
Your brow brow was bright.

But now your brow is sad, John,
You look no like the brow,
But blessings on your pretty brow,
John Anderson, my John.

John Anderson, my John,
We danced the hill together,
We sang a song, May John,
We had our amours.

Now we make like poor John,
But shame in hand we go,
We dance lightly at his feet,
John Anderson, my John.

Thus at the close, majestic perfection of 'Mary Morrison', and
the unanswerable beauty of 'My love is like a red, red rose'.
Thus at the last bend we in the magic spell cast by the
 lyrician songstress. And no man swords read them.
without regard to a mind so finely gifted and a head so steep in its understanding should have led to the sorrow and shame of a home in Dumfries when, at the age of 37 Robert Burns died.