



page after page of closely-printed type, are the oratorical 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. Bovill, 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 sympathy 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, BUT 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 gramophone 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 unsullied 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 as lecherous as a stoat. 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: "Oor Robin should hae had twa 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 orator engaged in a usually maudlin attempt to clothe this very human man in the robes of sainthood. 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 sorners", 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, 1799. The standard of morality in every section of the community was extraordinarily low, among rich and poor alike. Mrs Carswell, in her celebrated biography of the Poet, tells us of a drinking-match at which he was present at Friar's Carse between Captain Riddell and two other magistrates, "to determine which gentleman should be capable of last blowing a little ebony whistle, a

Scandinavian trophy which had many times changed hands on these terms. The three justices competed in strong claret 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 Fergusson 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, some of the atheistic Burnsians 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 Mauchline 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 parson - Dr. Lawrie of Loudoun, 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,
Wild send thee pleasure's devious way,
Mised by Fancy's meteor ray,
By 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 him 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 escapism and self-deception.

Burns the Man - alternating madly between moods of reckless exhilaration and passionate repentance, now filled with the most virtuous resolve to amend his ways, now writing in the language of a mule-skinner of his latest amorous adventure, one day bending with infinite tenderness over the uprooted daisy and the next in a roaring debauch with his Crochallan cronies in Edinburgh; Burns of the great heart and the weak resolve - here is no saint, but a man all too human, knowing his weakness 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 makers 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 Ayrshire 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 neighbours meet,
As market-days are wearing late,
And folk begin to tak the gate;
While we sit boosin' at the nappy,
An' getting fou and unco happy,
We think na on the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps, 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 "chapman billy" is? Does "tak the gate" mean "go home" or "lock up for the night"? Is "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 Sacred to the Memory of Mrs Oswald", or the "Ode to General Washington's Birthday" are woefully artificial poems. They are bombastic, insincere, and trivial. But then, even Homer nodded.

Burns' greatness as a poet lay in three specific directions. First as a Satirist, he takes his place only after Pope, Swift, Dryden and Byron. And I doubt if there is anything in these giants of the art of satire to equal the biting, searing, flaming, scathing last stanza of "Holy Willie's Prayer":

But Lord: remember me and mine
Wi' mercies temporal and divine:
That I for grace an' gear may shine,
Excelled by nane!
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 Hecht of Gottingen, 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 mad 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 bawdiness and licentious rhymes which marr

so much that he wrote. Here in the Songs I could almost submit myself to the myth of Robert Burns. Here at last is sincerity and tenderness and a great compassion and a bewitching sadness and an irresistible appeal.

Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met, or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted."

Matthew Arnold said that these were four of the greatest lines of lyric poetry ever written - and I would be the last to disagree with him. I cannot imagine that there will ever be a more perfect expression of the unregretful beauty of human love ever put down on paper than "John Anderson my jo." You remember:

"John Anderson my jo, John,
When we were first acquaint,
Your looks were like the raven,
Your bonny brow was brow.
But now your brow is bent, John,
Your looks are like the snaw,
But blessings on your frosty bow,
John Anderson, my jo."

John Anderson my jo, John,
We stampt the hill together,
And mow a dainty daisy, John,
We had us an' anither.
Now we moun to the doon, John,
But hand in hand we'll go.
An' sleep together at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo."

There is the sheer, magical perfection of "Mary Morrison"; and the unparalleled beauty of "My love is like a red, red rose." These at the last bind us in the magic spell cast by the Ayrshire ploughman. And no man could read them

without regret that a mind so divinely gifted and a
heart so deep in its understanding should have led
to the sorrow & sadness of a house in Dumfries where,
at the age of 37 Robert Burns died.