

Mr Crozier & Gentlemen

I now rise to propose the toast of the evening "The Immortal Memory of the Ayrshire Bard Robert Burns." You will readily believe that I rise to introduce this toast in the presence of so many ardent admirers of the genius of the Poet, with much diffidence. Indeed I feel that simply to give the toast without a single word of comment would be to do more justice to the memory of the Immortal Bard than I can hope from any feeble words which I possess to extol the fame of him, whose praises have been already sung by so many able men. And moreover what can any man tell the members of this Club about the Poet, which you do not already know. You all know as well as I do, and most of you much better, the story of his birth, his chequered career, and his inglorious death. However to follow the good example of the many able men, who have in former years filled this chair, I will venture to offer a few remarks on the life & works of him, who I believe has done more to give Scotchmen that spirit of noble and manly independence which is a characteristic of the race than any other.

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Our monarch's hindmost year, but ane
Was five-and-twenty day begun
'Twas then a blast o' Januar win'
Blew Lancel in on Robin.

Such is the poet's own record of the time of his birth in the auld clay biggin' near the banks of the Doon, a district now rendered classic by those poetic effusions, which thrill the hearts of Scotchmen, wheresoe'er they be. Little did his parents think that the prophecy of the gipsy, that the waly boy before them would not only hae misfortunes great & sma' but would be a credit to them a' should be fulfilled to the extent that he should be a credit not to his parents alone but ^{also} to the country which was honoured by his birth. It would seem that from the very first the fates were against him. His birth was heralded by a storm of rain and wind, which when the infant poet was but a few days old unroofed the frail cottage built by his father's own hands, and the helpless infant had to be protected from the elements in the house of a kind neighbour. Such however were not unfitting circumstances in connection with the birth of one, whose whole life was destined to be clouded with grief, and but seldom cheered with the sunshine of prosperity.

Burns spent the morning of his life in the district which gave him birth, and here also he received the rudiments of his education in a small country school taught by Mr Murdoch, and when the latter received an appointment to the Ayr Grammar School, his pupil did not forsake him, but took lodgings with his kindly tutor. Of the progress which Burns made in his education, Murdoch tells us that in reading, writing, and arithmetic he excelled all boys of his own age and surpassed several who were his seniors. Under the same teacher he strove to obtain a knowledge of French. When out walking together Murdoch was constantly telling him the names of different objects in French, and such progress did he make that his teacher tells us that about the end of the second week of study he began to read a little of Fénelon's *Telemaque*. This progress was truly remarkable, but like many a peasant's son in these days, the ripening of the harvest called him from his studies to more laborious duties. When in his nineteenth year he attended the school of a famous mathematician at Kirkoswald to study mensuration and surveying. He says himself that he made considerable progress in the study of these subjects, but made greater progress in the knowledge of mankind. Here he learned to

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drink his glass, and mix in a drunken squabble, but continued to attend his studies till the charms of a buxom young maid set him off at a tangent from the sphere of his labours.

The poet received a great part of his education from his father. That worthy man was in the habit of gathering his family round the ingle, after his day's work was o'er (a custom which I regret is so uncommon in our day, as I believe we cannot over-estimate the value of it to our youth) and in the form of a family chat conveying to his children his own knowledge, and communicating to them the lessons of his experience. The elder Burns seems to have been, for a man in his position, possessed of a wide and general knowledge, of keen discernment, of a spirit of independence, and, though always oppressed by poverty, willing to make every exertion and sacrifice for the education of his family. Early suffering made him despondent and somewhat austere, but he set his family an example of piety, patience, & fortitude, and well deserved the high eulogium composed by the poet for his epitaph.

O ye whose cheek the tear of pity stains
Draw near with pious reverence & attend
Here lie the loving husband's dear remains
The tender father and the generous friend.

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The pitying heart that felt for human woe.
The dauntless heart that feared no human pride
The friend of man, to vice alone a foe
"For e'en his failings leaned to virtue's side".

I will not dwell upon the poet's life at Mount Oliphant, where the factor's snash used to set the whole family into tears, upon his arduous toil at Lochlea, nor upon his experiences as a flax-dresser at Irvine, from which place he wrote that despondent letter to his father, in which he expresses the hope that soon he shall bid an eternal adieu to all the pains, and uneasiness, and disquietudes of this weary world. After the death of his father, whose all went among the hell hounds that growl in the kennel of justice, he along with his brother Gilbert, leased the farm of Mossiel with the firm determination to succeed, and set himself bravely to fight the battle of life. But again he was doomed to disappointment, for what with bad crops produced by bad seed, and by late harvests, he lost half his crops and to use his own words I returned like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire. His life at Mossiel was the most remarkable in his career. It was at the poet's fireside at Mossiel when he was visited by the Muse, an account of which he so beautifully relates in "The Vision".

While sitting complaining of misspent time he says.

I started, muttering Blockhead, coof,
And heaved on high my waukit loof
To swear by a' yon starry roof
Or some rash aith,
That I henceforth would be rhyme-proof
Till my last breath;

When, click, the string the snick did draw
And, jee, the door gaid to the wa'
And by my igh lowe I saw
Now bleezin' bright,
A tight outlandish hizzie, braw,
Come full in sight.

Then follows a noble description of the Muse, and
the poet finishes by describing his coronation
consecration by her decking him with the
wreath of holly, which she wore.

And wear thou this she solemn said
And bound the holly round my head
The polished leaves and berries red
Did rustling play,
And like a passing thought, she fled
In light away.

He came here with the brightest hopes, here
he experienced the most delightful ecstasy,
and the profoundest grief which love can
impart, here he composed a great many
of his best pieces, here he was reduced to
such extremities that he meditated emi-
gration, and it was from here that he

travelling to Edinburgh, where he met with such an ovation that any ordinary man would have been completely carried away. What a change for the rustic bard! How few in the poet's position, taken from the stilts of the plough and at once introduced into the most distinguished literary society which Edinburgh could boast, could have acted as he did? He never lost his head, the flattery of the great did not cause him to forget his true position, and I could believe that he would have much preferred a canny hour at e'en, his arms about his dearie o' to the company of the titled. The fame of his name was now in all men's mouths, and on his return to Moss-gil he was welcomed by even the Armours, the parents of his Bonnie Jean, who had forbidden their daughter to marry the poet, and whose stubbornness had caused him to pack up his trunk, and prepare to skulk out of the country.

Burns however could not settle at home. The dulness of a farmer's life at Moss-gil was too great a contrast to the excitement he had recently experienced in Edinburgh, and the impulsive poet mounted on Jenny Geddes sets off on a Highland tour. We find him at Inverary, where he thinks himself slighted by the landlora of the inn, who had for his guests at the time a party visiting the Duke

of Argyll, and whose inattention was rewarded
by these probably unmerited lines (8)

Whoe'er he be, who sojourns here
I pity much his case
Unless he's come to wait upon
The lord their god, his Grace.
There's naething here but Highland pride
But Highland could & hunger
If Providence has sent me here
'Twas surely in his anger.

Having returned to Mossiel the Poet remained
but a short time at home. He set out for
Edinburgh to settle with Creech, the publisher of
his works, and to start with Nicol of the
High School on another Highland tour.
It was during his stay at Edinburgh at this
time that he formed that unfortunate inti-
macy with Mrs. Inchhoe, the Claurinda of
that passionate and imprudent correspondence,
for which he has been so much blamed.
After settling with Creech from whom he received
about £600, the poet returned to Mossiel,
advanced about £200 to his brother Gilbert
to clear his feet, took the farm of Ellisland,
the worst of three of which he had the choice,
& which he selected on account of the beauty
of its surroundings rather than the fertility
of its soil, and soon after graced his fireside
with his Bonnie Jean, who had already a

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second time presented him with twins. The fame of the poet had reached the district before he took possession of Ellisland, and his society was courted by many estimable men. He would have been happy now had fortune been more propitious. He had not been long in the farm, however, till straitened circumstances caused him to accept an appointment in the Excise. He was a great favourite with all in the district, and at weddings, househeatings, kirs, & other festal occasions he was always a welcome guest. But farming was not his forte. The balance was always on the wrong side, and after a three year's occupancy of Ellisland the offer of promotion in the Excise to Dumfries at a salary of £70 per annum decided his course, and he settled down in a small house in the Southern Capital. His life in Dumfries seems to have been brightened by but few gleams of the sunshine of prosperity. As an officer of the Excise, he performed his duties conscientiously and punctually, and his conduct was praiseworthy, though it must be admitted that the want of prudence & caution occasionally brought him into trouble.

The fear of a French invasion at this time struck terror into the hearts of the people throughout the length & breadth of the land

and Burns was one of the Battalion of volunteers raised in Dumfries to repel if necessary the attack of the enemy. The poet-soldier displayed the qualities of the true patriot, and the stirring lines written by him on the occasion did much to arouse a spirit of defiance & self-reliance in the whole people.

Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?
Then let the loons beware, sir,
There's wooden walls upon our seas
And volunteers on shore sir
The Withs shall run to Corsicon
And Criffel ~~into Solway~~ sink in Solway
Ere we permit a foreign foe
On British ground to rally.

The poet's career was cut short in Dumfries, and his untimely death was a very melancholy one indeed. Racked by pain, deserted by friends, pinched by poverty, hunted by creditors till the horrors of a gaol made him half-distracted the great poet crossed that bourne whence no traveller returns on the 21st July 1796 at the early age of 37.

Having thus sketched the life of the poet, I will now say a few words on his works. Sprung from the people, he was the poet of the people. All his feelings & sympathies were akin to theirs, and he sang of the loves and joys, the hopes and fears, the cares and sorrows of their every day life in glowing strains of

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sweetest melody. Hence the hold he at once obtained on the public mind of this country, a hold and an influence ever deepening and extending.

You have all read and admired his wonderful poems, in which the characters are struck off so graphically and full of life that we can almost see them and lay our hands upon them. His Shanters, & Hornbooks, & Holy Willies and a host of other representatives of the same stamp are as well known, amusing, and instructive to the present generation as they were to the past, and shall continue to stand forth as living admonitions to the drunkard, the quack, & the hypocrite till the language in which they are painted can no longer be read, just as his family of Cotters shall continue a picture & pattern of piety and worth, till the national character of Scotland has been lost. In Tam o' Shanter, that wonderful production of a winter's day, we see painted before our very eyes Tam, the Souther, the landlady, the ride in the storm, Alloway's auld haunted kirk, the accumulated horrors revealed, the dance of the witches to the pipes of auld Nick, the furious rush after the affrighted Tam, the

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crisis on the key stone of the brig, and the
skelping hame of the tailless gray mare, while
in the midst of this description of horror and
humour are beautifully introduced those
lines on the vanity of human pleasure:—

But pleasures are like poppies spread
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed
Or like the snow fall in the river
A moment white—then melts for ever.
Or like the borealis race
That flit ere you can point the place
Or like the rainbow's lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm.

What a vivid picture he draws of the Cottar's
fireside. Then he delineates as with the
brush of a master a scene of happiness,
content, industry, love, and frugality.
You see drop into the family circle Jenny,
their eldest hope, who shows a braw new
gown, you hear the gentle rap of the neigh-
bour lad who has accompanied Jenny
home, and who, blate & bashful, is invited
into the circle, the conversation about horses
and ploughs, you see the mother spread
the supper table, and then

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The cheerful supper done, we serious face
They round the single form a circle wide,
The sire turns o'er wi' patriarchal grace
The big ha' Bible, ance his father's pride.
His bonnet reverently is laid aside
His lyart haffets, wearing thin and bare
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide
He wales a portion with judicious care
and 'Let us worship God,' he says with solemn air.
Then again what a contrast is his inimitable
description of the Jolly Beggar's Saturday evening
feast in Poesie Nancy's. What a motley crowd
is assembled there? What a scene of
merry making, drinking, singing, and
jollity is there enacted? How truthfully and
graphically he describes the life and character
of these bearers of the meal pike, and draws
the curtain over them while they all shout:—

A fig for those by law protected
Liberty's a glorious feast
Courts for cowards were erected
Churches built to please the priests.

Time prevents me from doing more than men-
tioning 'the Holy Fair' a witty and humorous
satire on the indecent festivities accompany-
ing the administration of the Sacrament
in these times, Death & Dr. Hornbook, a satire

on the pedantic dominion of Tarbolton,
man was made to mourn, at the time of the
composition of which the poet seems to have
been in one of his despondent moods, and
many others appealing to the sympathies
of every reader.

We are all I believe gentlemen more inti-
mately acquainted with his rich and
glorious songs, which altogether form a
body of lyric poetry, such as in no age or
nation any other man has ever produced.
All the nice and delicate chords of the human
heart are under his control, and respond
at will to his masterly touch. All the
affections and passions of our common
nature are intimately known to him,
and subject to his irresistible sway, so that
he awakes and warms and intensifies
them at his pleasure. So much so is this the
case that while we are under the spell of
some of his rapturous verses properly sung,
our own personality for the time is lost
and forgotten, and our bosoms shaken
with all the stirring emotions of the hero
or heroine of the piece. Who does not feel a
thrill of patriotism run through his veins

when Scots wha hae is sung? Who does not
experience a feeling of noble independence in A
man's a man's for a' that? Who in a foreign land
can listen to Ye Banks & Braes without his thoughts
travelling to the land of Cakes, who bowed down with
poverty does not receive consolation and encouragement
from the words of Is there for honest poverty! What
love songs can compare with It was upon a
lammie's night, O a' the airts the wind can blaw,
my love is like a red, red rose; what bacchanalian
song equals Willie brewed a peck o' maut; with
what feeling of emotion does O Mary, dear
departed shade, fill us; or what social or
festal meeting of Scotchmen at home or
abroad can break up without 'Auld Lang Syne'.
The tender and feeling heart which beat
within his bosom could not see the wee,
modest, crimson, tipped flower covered up
with the plough, nor the wee, sleekit, cowrin'
tim'rous beastie deprived of its sheltering
nest without a pang of sorrow, while the
sight of a poor wounded hare limping past
him melted his easily softened heart,
and brought from him these lines:—

Inhuman man, curse on thy barbarous act
And blasted be thy murder aiming eye
May never pity soothe thee with a sigh
Nor even pleasure glad thy cruel heart.

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Go live poor wanderer of the wood & field
The bitter little that of life remains
No more the thickening brakes & verdant plains
To thee shall home, or food, or pastime yield.

Burns has been accused of infidelity, but be his faults what they may, I cannot believe this of him. How could the author of the *Cottar's Saturday Night*, *To Mary in Heaven*, and many other pieces bearing a truly religious impress be an unbeliever. It is true that he attacked fiercely and rightly too the hypocrisy and even superstition that existed on all sides of him, but that does not prove that he was irreligious. On the contrary it shows that there burned within him a true, noble, pure, & reverent spirit. He loved to teach his boys their duty to God and their neighbour, and on the authority of a servant of his in Mossiel it has been said that he conducted family worship regularly.

~~Had~~ Burns any faults? Undoubtedly he had, for he was but a mere man, and no one knew or regretted them more than he did. But when we consider the times in which he lived, need we wonder. They were but as the spots on the sun lost in the brilliant dazzle & light of that great luminary.

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Let us gently scan our brother man,
let us judge ourselves severely, but others
leniently, and let us strive to admire in
Burns whatever is worthy of admiration
and honour his genius as it deserves.

And now gentlemen, I call upon you
to drink to the memory of the Immortal
Burns with all the honours, for though
it is usual to drink to the memory
of the departed in silence, yet his
memory is ever green, he ever liveth
in our hearts.
