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J. Ramsay MacDonald

J. Ramsay MacDonald on Robert Burns¹

The question is put year after year, when the blast of January winds blows into our minds the name of Robert Burns, "Why has this man won such an intimate and abiding place in the hearts of his fellow countrymen?"

The answer given even by Burns devotees is not always so satisfactory as it might be. He was intensely human and his genius, beating defiantly against the bars of his circumstance, has given his critics an opportunity to blame him and his admirers a cause to shake at times an admonishing head at him.

But the grave gathering which accompanied his body to the grave in Dumfries that sad day in July 1796 instinctively knew that it was not merely bidding farewell to a townsman notable in his day, but was paying the first tribute to an immortal memory. Whether one reads his poems or his letters, whether one searches the records left of his conversations, or studies the impressions made by his personality on his contemporaries, one discovers a man cast in heroic mould and formed of the essential qualities of human attractiveness and greatness.

This is the personality of Burns, and though he was fated to play in life only minor and heartbreaking parts and was doomed to die an excise man in a little abode crowded up in a narrow Dumfries street, time has moved him to the company of those rare beings who never die. He was a man amongst men. Force of being and distinction of mind gave him and his work immortality. He was not only for his generation, he was the embodiment of the individuality, in

¹Taped from Columbia recording of 28 Nov. 1929. Transcribed by Nicole Hopkins.

weakness and in power, in tenderness and in strength, of his people and he was endowed with the genius to manifest them by an art at once robust and lyrical.

His message was not a creed of the intellect, cold and unanswerable, it was a passion of the soul eruptive and glowing like the molten floods of a volcano. The moral protest of "The Twa Dogs" rising up to the sublime devotion of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" is what is in the heart of every self-respecting poor man, expressed by one whose lips are the adequate servant of his feelings. When Burns wrote that it was beyond one's "pow'r, / To keep, at times, frae being sour," when one saw "how things" were "shar'd," there was no envy in his heart.² The richly tender pictures of humble life and service which glow in his poems are painted to establish a claim that these lives are the foundations of a great state. "From Scenes like these, old Scotia's grandeur springs."³ "The pith o' sense and pride o' worth are higher rank than a' that."⁴

Here we have a deep and vital conviction regarding what are the qualities and the virtues of personal and national greatness. It is that quality of the folk mind and the folk service appreciated and voiced by a man who himself is a piece of elemental greatness which secures immortality for Burns. Burns viewed that quality in its essential contents. It is tender in its consideration and embraces everything from Auld Nick himself to the mouse and the daisy. It is one with nature in all its moods. Nature is its companion in love, and its consoler in death:

I see her in the dewy flowers—
 I see her sweet and fair.
 I hear her in the tunefu birds—
 I hear her charm the air.
 There is no bonnie flower that springs
 By fountain, shaw or green,
 There is no bonnie bird that sings
 But minds me o my Jean.⁵

So also, in that elegiac lyric on Captain Matthew Henderson, he enlists the glorious companionship of nature in his pageant of sorrow.

²"Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet," in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 65. Henceforth *Poems*.

³"The Cotter's Saturday Night," *Poems*, I, 151.

⁴"For a' That and a' That," *Poems*, II, 763.

⁵A slightly anglicized version of "I Love my Jean," also known as "Of a' the Airs the Wind can Blaw," see *Poems*, I, 422.

Another of the essential possessions of human power and greatness is the heart of the lover. Burns was supreme in his capacity to love. His love songs, the music of devotion to the divinity of beauty, with every chord of his being sounding in the swelling harmony. Terrible are the defects of a man if the melody of Burns's love songs is not sleeping in his heart, sad with a world's tenderness, happy with a world's beauty, gay with a world's devotion.

His capacity to love was the inspired and inspiring inner core of his sense of brotherhood. He was a devoted son of Scotland, his all-respected mother, and he gave her "Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled" to renew her life through all time. When "trimmers o'er guarding her safety disturbed her,"⁶ he sprang to her defense: "Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?"⁷

But in Burns the love of his own country was not measured by his hatred of nor offense to another. During the year when he wrote his challenge to Gaul [1795], he also wrote the lines which have been more frequently quoted as the creed of peacemakers than any other:

It's comin yet for a' that,
That Man to Man the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.⁸

His being, sustained by the breath of independence, ardent in its devotion to liberty, contemptuous of men and nations who dared not lift up their heads, saw in a world of fraternity and peace the only conditions under which the great patriot could live and be satisfied. The challenging songs he wrote in praise of liberty during the French Revolution rose to a musical and lyrical climax in dreams of peace. The last stanza of the "Tree of Liberty" runs:

Wi' plenty o' sic trees, I trow,
The world would live in peace, man;
The sword would help to mak a plough,
The din o' war wad cease, man.⁹

International harmony is the triumphant ending of the work of the national heroes who have struggled and the national causes which have inspired.

⁶MacDonald is here apparently disremembering. The phrase is not to be found in James A. Mackay, compiler, *Burns A-Z: The Complete Word Finder* (Dumfries, 1990).

⁷"The Dumfries Volunteers," *Poems*, II, 765.

⁸"For a' That and a' That," *Poems*, II, 763.

⁹This is from the penultimate, not last, stanza of "The Tree of Liberty," *Poems*, II, 912.

Thus it is that year after year passes we do homage to one of the greatest men. He spoke to us in song, he drew us to invite his lyrical genius, but he is more than a melodist. The chords which he touched and the emotions which touched them belong to the permanent joys and beauties and harmonies which are the sources of life and of protest. So homage will be paid to him

Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:¹⁰

or until the name of Scotland is lost and the hearts of her children cease to beat.

Prime Minister of Great Britain
1924; 1929-1935

¹⁰“A Red Red Rose,” *Poems*, II, 735.



This historical image of the frontispiece of Robert Burns' poem was scanned by The British Library from a facsimile of the original book under the supervision of printed on acid-free, high-quality paper. The typesetters, Phoenix, London, have printed the text in a font of the same style as the original.

Mousie, thou art no thy lane

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