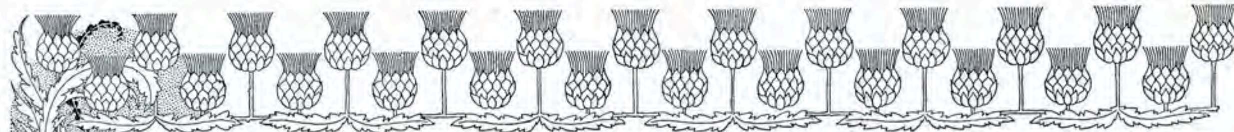

# THE OTHER SIDE OF ROBERT BURNS

*By Arthur Warren*

GREAT men taken up in any way are profitable company," says Carlyle. The dictum is not disproved when we "take up" "Rantin' Rovin' Robin," although most of his critics seem to have agreed upon forgetting the good there was in his character. There is just now a burst of centennial celebration of Robert Burns, but, as if through some tactless enthusiasm, or some

COTTAGE IN WHICH BURNS WAS BORN

strange desire to emphasize a certain popular impression of the man, the commemoration is not of his birth but of his death. We have the curious spectacle of the English-speaking world jubilant over the hundredth anniversary of the disappearance from the planet of one of its great poets! If this be not so it is puzzling to know why the centenary of a man's decease and burial should be charged with festive exercises. The occasion might spur some of us with a desire to celebrate the poet's advent in the world. The characters of most men are apt to reveal what the searcher looks for. If we look for courage, honesty, big-heartedness, the championship of the oppressed and needy, and the power to achieve greatness in the face of almost every circumstance of opposition—and these are surely manly qualities—we shall find them in Robert Burns, in spite of many writers and much popular unbelief.

Burns is one of the poets whose works are more praised than read, and whose character

WHERE "TAM O'SHANTER" WAS WRITTEN

[Ellisland Farm, the poet's home from 1788 to 1791]

has received more aspersion than understanding from the world. Comparatively few of those who talk so much about him now comprehend either his Ayrshire dialect or the thousand contradictions in his character. Every one agrees that he is one of the most famous of poets who has written in English—or in perversions of it—yet even in Scotland there is to-day but a minority which understands and appreciates all the curious twists and turns of his phrasing, and the world over there are not many persons who trouble to think of the Scotch bard as anything more than a reprehensible character. In the outburst of comment which memorializes the centenary of his death more is said about his faults as a man than about his merits as a master of song. That is because Robbie was never over-modest. He was no hypocrite. His verses abounded with his own confessions.

THE DUMFRIES HOUSE IN WHICH BURNS DIED

Burns was no saint. Everybody knows that, and most of his commentators, in sudden accessions of virtue, delight to pelt his memory with stones. There has been too much pelting. Nobody ever lashed himself more pitilessly than Burns did. He hated hypocrisy in others, and he never deceived himself, nor permitted others to be deceived about his own failings. Perhaps he made himself appear more reprehensible than he really was. There was a morbid quality in his nature, and he also had a keen sense of the ridiculous. The combination allowed him to spare no one—himself least of all.

The popular impression has never allowed itself to go much further than Burns' confessions. But it is possible to go much further and find a great deal that is admirable in the character of the "Ploughman

"ROBIN'S" FIRST HOME OF HIS OWN

[The Back Causeway, Mauchline; in the two upper rooms of the first house on the left Burns and his wife made their first home]

Poet." To begin with it is necessary to understand something of the Scotland in which he lived. Whatever it may be to-day, the Scotland of a hundred years ago was a country of hard-grained Puritanism overlaid upon a human nature having most of the defects of the Celt. Living was hard to get, morals were discussed more than they were practiced, and though preaching was universal it was too often accompanied by hard drinking.

Robert Burns—Poet

Some communities seemed to live on cant. The air was rent with the squabbles of sects, whose pretensions seldom squared with their daily lives. In such a community Robert Burns was born. He came into the world on the twenty-fifth of January, 1759, in a rude, clay-built cottage, two miles to the south of Ayr, and in the immediate neighborhood of the Kirk of Alloway, and the Auld Brig o' Doon. A week after his birth the house was nearly destroyed by a gale, and baby Bobbie and his mother were carried through the storm to the shelter of a hovel near by.

Storms of one sort or another followed Burns from his cradle to his grave—storms of adversity, of joviality and melancholy, of persecution and flattery, of enthusiasm, of passion, of remorse. He remained what nature made him—a big

THE POET'S BOYHOOD HOME

[Mount Oliphant Farm, where Burns spent his early youth]

boy, undeterred by hardship, unspoiled by fame; courageous, frank, sometimes boisterous, often ungovernable, fickle in love, staunch in friendship, generous always, detesting sham and pretense, falling often into evil ways, and yet reverencing goodness and purity and sacred things. A contradictory character, if you will, but it was made that way, and nothing ever seemed capable of training it. And, at any rate, from its combination of contradictions it most generously enriched the world with an unmatched gift of song.

MOSSGIEL FARM

[Where Burns wrote his first book of poems]

Given a youth of unusually ardent imagination, filled with a love of beauty and song; endowed with tremendous manly vigor, while yet in his early teens; born with a reckless, generous, jovial spirit, mingled with a turn for satire, a keen love of fun, a delight in melody and musing; an intensely affectionate nature always craving for sympathy; place him in the midst of a hard, grinding life; batter him with the hardest, most unsympathetic Puritanism, which he clearly sees that you do not practice; yoke him to the plough, and stifle all his highest aspirations, and what do you expect to make of him in the rural Scotland of the seventeen hundreds?

The family name was not "Burns," but "Burnes," or "Burness." Robert was the first to change it. Perhaps he thought his chosen form the fitter for a poet's service. Perhaps it is. His father was a gardener on a gentleman's estate. He was subsequently a farmer in a small way. The elder

JEAN ARMOUR'S BIRTHPLACE

[The Cowgate, Mauchline; in the little low cottage on the left, near the end of the street, Burns' wife was born]

Burness was a man of ordinary school education but uncommon insight. Robert always felt for him a profound veneration. He was "the toil-worn cotter," "the priestlike father," "the saint, the father, and the husband," of "The Cotter's Saturday Night." Robert's mother, Agnes, was a loving, hard-working, intelligent woman, whose mind was stored with Scottish ballads and traditions upon which the poet's mind was fed from infancy.

Robert was the eldest of seven children—four boys and three girls, all of whom were brought up to help at the farming. Robert received from his father thirty-five dollars a year for his labor, minus the cost of his home-made clothes. That was the utmost of his earning until he published his first book of verse. Robert began his schooling in his sixth year. He was at that time a serious, contemplative lad of rueful countenance, not a favorite with anybody, and given to brooding over eerie tales of ghosts and brownies and kelpies, and such small deer, and so filling his mind with superstition, legend and romance that even when he was a man he would say that he sometimes caught himself glancing suspiciously at dark corners, or looking under the bed for bugaboos. The books he most delighted in as a youngster were the "Life of Hannibal," and anything he could find about Sir William Wallace.

Farming had to alternate with schooling, and at the age of fourteen Bobbie was as skillful at the plough as any grown man in the country. He was a strong lad, and he became an exceptionally strong man. He was as remarkable

THE AULD BRIG O' DOON

for his physical vigor as for his high spirits and love of jollity, even in his early teens. His father was, all this time, getting deeper into money difficulties, which finally wore him out. Robert, even as a lad, felt most keenly

for his father's distressing circumstances, and he showed a sympathy which was far beyond his years. The father, in turn, encouraged the boy in his studies, and permitted him, when he was fifteen, to spend two weeks before harvest time, and a week after it, with his old teacher, Murdoch. Young Burns devoted that holiday to brushing up his English grammar, and in beginning a course of French reading. He had already studied French, and was soon able to read French prose quite easily.

HE HAD read much, and read well, by the time he was sixteen. "A Select Collection of English Songs" was his constant companion. He carried it in his pocket, read it as he walked to and from his work, as he guided the plough, as he drove the farm-cart. He lived in his imagination. His daily work was wholly uncongenial, but he never indulged in complaint. He knew he was fitted for something beyond manual labor, but just what he did not know until he had reached the early twenties, and he never, even when he became famous, tried to escape from the grinding life where his duty lay. Feeling, as he did, the weight of misfortune, the heavy burdens of daily labor and suffering, as he did, from over-sensitiveness, he must have had great strength of character and force of will to have borne up so sturdily. His early life was bitterly hard, and the recollection of it never faded from his mind.

Burns' manners were never uncouth, but whatever they were he polished them at a dancing-school when he was seventeen. The manners of that time were far more elaborate than those of our day, and Robert's training in them proved to be of much service when he had won celebrity, and went up to Edinburgh to associate with the learned and fashionable folk of that city.

Three months before his father died, in 1784, Robert and his brother took a farm called Mossgiel, in the Parish of Mauchline. It was a farm of one hundred and nineteen acres, and the rent was four hundred and fifty dollars a year. They took the place to make a home for their parents, who had lost their own holding. Robert was then twenty-five years of age. He remained four years at Mossgiel. They were not prosperous years from the farming point of view. Those four years threatened the prosperity of Robert the farmer, but they developed the highest energies of Robert the poet. For it was while living at Mossgiel that he gave to the world the work which established his fame. It was here, also, that his character showed in its brightest lights. It cast dark shadows, too, but it is not my intention to write about them. Too much has been made of that branch of the subject by other writers. They seem determined to have us forget the best side of "Rantin' Robin."

IF WE are to learn any good thing from Burns' life it is a lesson of pluck, and though not enough has been made of this aspect of Bobbie's character it was shown in his thorough-going belief in the soundness of his literary judgment. I was on the point of saying "his professional judgment." But we must remember that literature was not a profession with Robert Burns. He did not abandon farming in order to become a poet, but in order to become a gauger in the excise department and thereby to earn a steady income for his family. His poetry made him famous enough, but it brought him very little money. The revenue that his pen earned him amounted to less than five thousand dollars all told.

I have spoken of his pluck. Well, here was a young fellow born with a gift of song which he had to train unaided. He was poor; he had to get his education as best he could; he had to work hard at the hardest kind of uncongenial employment; he felt the promptings of a poet for years before he burst into song, and his lot was cast in a hard-grained community where poetry was but lightly valued, and where a "fellow who wrote verses" was bound to be classed among the ne'er-do-wells. But he was not deterred from his faith in his own powers. He stuck to his farming in order to make a living, and he developed his poetic genius in order to gratify his love of song. No amount of hardship—and he encountered a great deal of it—diverted him from the great object of his life. It is literally true that he often composed verses while he was guiding the plough. And his ploughing was none the worse for that. There was not a better ploughman than he in all Ayrshire. He did not neglect one duty because he preferred another. If he had had what, for lack of a better phrase, we call a moral balance he might have made more of his life. But we have to take him as we find him.

IT IS a mistake to suppose, as many do, that Burns was altogether given up to gallantry and carousal. He was not, and he never pretended to be, an exemplary character. Whatever he did he did with all his energy. He was a creature of emotions and strong passions. His nature was undisciplined. The right influences for the discipline of such a character as his were but seldom around him. The influences he knew were all too severe and repressive on the one hand, or all too lax on the other. He was subject to moments of fiery enthusiasm, and to days of acute remorse. But, for all that, he worked, and worked hard. He used to say that he could not conceive a more mortifying picture of human life than a man seeking work. "Make work," he would say, and he made it. He always welcomed the winter time, which gave him a respite from farm labor and enabled him to follow his poetic bent. This fact, together with the other that his life was, from his birth, a stormy one, had much to do with his poetic habit of celebrating Nature in her sternest and wildest moods. He wrote but little of summer and sunshine, and much of winter and gray days:

> "When biting Boreas, fell and doure
> Sharp shivers thro' the leafless bow'r."

Many persons have fancied because Burns had no patience with "the unco' guid," and because he lashed all canting brothers with his satire, that he had no reverence for religion and for whatever was sacred to straight-thinking people. There could be no more erroneous judgment of him. Most characters have two sides, but Burns had any number. We must get that fact firmly into our minds or we will never understand the man we talk so much about. Only ignorance of human nature could prompt any one to ask how it could be possible for the poet who wrote "The Cotter's Saturday Night," and his versification of the Psalms, to also have written "Holy Willie's Prayer," "The Ordination," and certain roistering songs. But Burns' mind was, like the sea, stirred by every wind that chanced to blow. He would have a dozen moods a day, and his muse expressed herself with corresponding variation.

ON THE other hand, Burns was honestly touched by real evidences of devoted living, and especially among the poor. The old Scotch habit of family worship always appealed to him, and he would suffer no one to make sport of it. There were some recollections that were sacred to him through life, and one of these was of his father, who, as the household gathered around the ingle, would kneel, saying simply, "Let us worship God," and then, with patriarchal grace, read from "the big ha-Bible." And all this was something more than a memory, for when Robert had won wide recognition as a poet, and all Scotland was flattering him, he passed the tedious weeks of a long illness in a study of the Scriptures. "I have taken tooth and nail to the Bible," he said. And then he ordered from a bookbinder in one of the big towns an octavo Bible "in the best paper and print, and to be bound with all the elegance of your craft." It was during this time, in one of his dark moods, feeling that poverty must always be before him, he said, "But I have sturdily withstood these buffetings many a hard-labored day, and still my motto is, 'I Dare!'"

Burns ever contemplated with indignation the inequality of human conditions, and the contrast between his own worldly circumstances and his intellectual rank. He expressed this thought a thousand times, in a thousand ways, as, for instance, in "Man was Made to Mourn," and in the "Epistle to Davie."

AFTER three or four years at Mossgiel it became clear that the farm could never yield more than a bare existence for so many persons, and Robert decided to lighten the establishment of his own charges. He proposed to seek his fortune in the Indies, and send back money to help his relatives. But luckily for Scottish literature he did nothing of the sort, though he more than once set forth from home. His departure was prevented by various mischances. This was the gloomiest period of his life. The narrative of it is depressing and need not be given here. It has little to do with his poetry, except that the misfortunes which pressed upon him prevented him from emigrating, and thereby preserved to Scotland the man who was to be her chief of poets. The case is not covered by saying that these particular misfortunes were due to Burns' own folly, for everybody and everything seemed to combine against him at that time, as if to make it impossible for him to do what he thought was right. He was treated with contempt and literally persecuted. He was suffering from the attacks of enemies and from the pinch of poverty. Had it not been for one or two appreciative friends the world would have known nothing of his powers of song. As yet he had published nothing, but he had written much. The friends who remained staunch urged him to print his poems and thereby try to "raise the wind." They subscribed for copies and induced others to do the same. Thus encouraged, Burns entered into treaty with a printer at Kilmarnock, and straightway set about the composition of new poems for the projected book. Six hundred copies of the volume were printed, subscriptions were obtained, and, after all expenses were paid, there remained to the poet a profit of about one hundred dollars. Very soon the West of Scotland was ringing with the poet's praise. He had heretofore been known only to the peasantry; he now became known to persons of rank and learning. He was much sought after. He was invited to some great houses. He was introduced to a society which he had never before approached. But he proved himself fully equal to his new opportunities. He remained simple, manly and independent; his manners were fully as good as those of his new friends, and nothing was more remarkable than the fluency, the purity, and the originality of his conversation. His financial position, however, had not improved with this pleasant recognition. He was still in the midst of many harassing troubles.

HAPPILY a second edition of his poems was brought out. It included some newer pieces, and it attracted the attention of the best minds in Scotland. To produce this edition Burns was induced to visit Edinburgh, and there he was lionized. The Ayrshire ploughman had become recognized as the first of Scottish poets. The brightest, the richest, and the highest of Scottish society opened their doors to him, fêted him, day after day, night after night, during his stay there. His book was selling well, but he was spending little. Through all that triumphant visit he lodged in a garret in an obscure quarter of the town. Success did not rouse in him extravagant desires, it did not turn his head, it did not commit him to the mistake of forsaking his usual life for a metropolitan career. He needed no one to whisper to him reminders of whence he had risen and whither he was to return in the flush of his fame. Edinburgh idolized him, and yet he was unspoiled by the fire of praise. Sir Walter Scott said of him: "Burns expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least intrusive 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 and information more perfectly free from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment."

Burns had left home vilified, miserably poor, and comparatively unknown. He returned after some months the most famous man in Scotland, and with a good sum of money in his possession. Of this money he gave a third part—a thousand dollars—to his brother, who was hard-pinched. Mauchline, which had set its face against him six months before, was now proud to welcome him. But the spirit that had preserved its balance in Edinburgh was not likely to lose it in a small village. He did not stay long at Mauchline, but went to another district, where he took a farm at a place called Ellisland, investing in it the remainder of the capital which he had brought from Edinburgh. His much-discussed marriage with Jean Armour had meanwhile taken place. Burns has been hotly assailed because of his alleged indifference to his wife, but the fact is that he was ardently fond of her. For the rest, "his heart was the merest tinder," as one sympathetic critic—a countryman of his—has said. It is hardly true, though, that "any pair of eyes were bright enough to set it in a flame." Burns himself put the case thus: "When I meet with a person after my own heart I positively feel what an orthodox Protestant would call a species of idolatry, which acts on my fancy like inspiration." But it was chiefly fancy, and it would rouse his poetic desire to write verses of adoration. We are not always to take him seriously in this respect. It is not fair to think of him merely as a roystering, dissolute ploughboy. He was the most excitable of poets, and in his passions not one of the strongest of men. But Jean Armour was true to him, and his true affection never really turned from her. Jean worshiped him—literally worshiped him. And when we study her devoted life we must agree that there must have been much that was admirable in the character of a man who was adored by so true a woman. Burns' biographers have paid too scanty attention to all this. There is no use in apologizing for the defects of Bobbie's life, but there is such a thing as insisting too heavily upon them. And, at any rate, if Burns had been a different sort he might never have bequeathed to the world his rich gift of song. Instead of throwing stones at his grave we can, amid all these centennial exercises, take the view held by so pure a mind as that of Wordsworth, who said of him: "It is probable that he would have proved a still greater poet, if by strength of reason he could have controlled the propensities which his sensibilities engendered; but he would have been a poet of a different class, and certain it is, had that desirable restraint been early established, many peculiar beauties which enrich his verses could never have existed, and many necessary influences, which greatly contribute to their effect, would have been wanting."

WE MUST judge any man by the age in which he lived, and by what he did. What did Burns do? He purified Scottish song! He found it a repository of vileness, he made it a fountain of inspiring and enduring melody. He glorified the lives of the people. And, though you may think it strange, I find diligent Scotch teetotalers upholding Burns as the temperance reformer of his age. And so stern a moralist as the late Dr. McCosh, of Princeton, was once heard to say that, "The poet who wrote 'A man's a man for a' that' within six months of his death, and who kept the excise books without blot or mistake, was not very far gone as a man."

The three or four years which Burns spent at Ellisland with his wife and children were, in some respects, the happiest period of his life, in spite of occasional lapses into the melancholy which had haunted his youth. He welcomed Jean to their new home in the song beginning:

> "I hae a wife o' my ain,"

and soon after that he exclaimed:

> "O, were I on Parnassus' Hill,
> Or had of Helicon my fill,
> That I might catch poetic skill
> To sing how dear I love thee!"

And then there was that charming song: "My wife's a winsome wee thing." While at Ellisland he was also in the excise service, and in this duty he often rode two hundred miles a week on horseback. How he managed to do all this, and attend to his farm and write his poems, is a problem to modern bards and farmers. But he did it. He worked hard for the support of his family. He was a wonderful worker. In the course of his brief life he gave to the world six hundred and fifty poems. And all the while he was an industrious farmer, and in the latter years an exciseman! Here at Ellisland, pressed as he was with his various duties, he wrote some of his best poems, including "Tam o' Shanter," "Willie Brewed a Peck o' Maut," and "To Mary in Heaven." Too much has been made in the thousand stories of Burns' life of the "Highland Mary" episode, and too little of what he really felt for Jean Armour, and of Jean's intense loyalty to him and devoted care of him. The real facts about Highland Mary will never be known. They comprise the one episode of Burns' life which is veiled in mystery. But one can study the poet's life closely enough to see that the persecution which in the early days seemed to hopelessly separate him from love drove him to Highland Mary for solace, and that Mary's sudden death idealized that Highland lassie in his memory. There was not much more to it, and Jean never troubled herself about it. There has been a sad waste of popular sympathy over Highland Mary. It is to loyal Jean our thoughts should turn. Burns' love for her and for his children was very great. That is a pleasing picture of him handed down by one who saw him "sitting in the summer evening at his door with his little daughter in his arms, dandling her, and singing to her, and trying to elicit her mental faculties." The little girl died in the autumn of 1795, when her father's health was failing.

BURNS was then living in Dumfries. He had given up farming in order to devote himself wholly to an excise appointment which would yield more certain returns, though even these were small enough. In November, 1791, he sold out at Ellisland, under favorable terms, and with the proceeds removed to the town of Dumfries, to the second floor of a small house in the Wee Vennel, now called Bank Street, subsequently shifting to a detached house in the Mill Vennel, now called Burns Street. For the brief remainder of his life he lived on a small salary of from three hundred and fifty to four hundred and fifty dollars a year, earned as an excise officer. In July, 1796, the protracted illness from which he had been suffering became so acute that he was advised to go to the seaside as a last resort. He went off to Brow, on Solway Firth. All his thoughts at this time were of his wife, whose condition was such as to warrant his fears. His anxiety for her increasing, he hastened back to Dumfries. He was so weak on reaching home that he could hardly stand. Barely able to hold a pen he wrote a note of appeal, begging his wife's mother, who was estranged from her daughter, to come on to Dumfries, as Jean was in urgent need of her care. They were the last words he ever wrote.

Let us not forget that the expiring effort of the failing genius was impelled by tender anxiety for his loving wife. In his dying hours he begged her, if his mind should wander, to touch him and thus recall him to himself. It was as he wished. The touch of his Jean was the last sensation which Robert Burns carried with him to eternity. He died on the twenty-first of July, 1796, in the thirty-eighth year of his age. On the day of his burial his son, Maxwell, was born. The little fellow lived less than three years.

The Scottish admiration for Burns was so great that his widow and children (three sons and two daughters) were not suffered to know want. A subscription of six thousand dollars was immediately raised for them. Four years later, that is to say, in 1800, Currie's well-known edition of the poet's works appeared. This realized seven thousand dollars more for the family. These sums made a snug fortune in those days. Duly invested, the amount yielded an income for the modest though comfortable maintenance of Jean and her children. Jean Burns survived her husband thirty-eight years.