

The Centenary of Robert Burns.

BORN 25TH JANUARY, 1759 — DIED 21ST JULY, 1796.

BY ALEXANDER CARGILL.



NOT long ago there died a good old Scots worthy who used to say that the saddest calamity that could possibly overtake him would be the loss of his memory, since it would involve his inability to sing the songs of his beloved Robbie Burns! And who, among Scotsmen, doesn't know how deeply Professor Blackie loved the great national bard, and fondly cherished everything appertaining to his immortal memory? To forget his Burns! Anything in the world but *that!*

There is a note of real pathos in this story of Blackie's love for Burns; and yet, how applicable is it to thousands of the countrymen of the poet. For Scotland could no more forget her Burns than the mother her child, and many generations must elapse ere she can suffer *him*, of all her children, to languish and die outside her affection and beyond her regard.

I well remember the centenary of the *birth* of Robert Burns in the year 1859. I was then but a boy, but old enough to discern in that famous celebration that the name of Burns was one of prime significance to Scotland and the Scottish people. Already, the thirty-seven years or thereby that made up the quantum of the poet's life a century ago have come and gone in our century, and, again, in the centenary of his *death*, the opportunity is gladly hailed to memorize the bard and to learn, if possible, something new from his life and its lessons.

To learn in suffering what they teach in song, is, assuredly, as true a line as ever was written to epitomize one of the most important functions of many of the world's greatest singers. Not that suffering is the *Alpha* and *Omega* of the poet's message—not always the burden or *overcome* of his song—but it is frequently the deepest chord, the most eloquent strain in all the utterance. If, haply, our modern poets are exempt—as a class—from this fundamental condition of the gift of true and abiding poesy, there are many whose voices are still paramount and surpassing, though the singers themselves are long passed away, to whom Shelley's fine line is peculiarly applicable. But to no poet of any age or clime could it be more applicable than to Robert Burns!



PROFILE OF BURNS.



BURNS'S SEAL.

In many respects Burns was an ideal son of sorrow. His cup of life, if dashed now and again with a spice of the cordial of genuine human joy and happiness, was—most of it—of the bitterness of wormwood; and from the opening years of early manhood to the last day of his all too brief existence, his career was full of



From the picture by

THE BIRTH-PLACE OF BURNS.

[D. O. Hill, R.S.A.]



From the Picture by]

THE BIRTH-PLACE OF BURNS—INTERIOR.

[D. O. Hill, R.S.A.

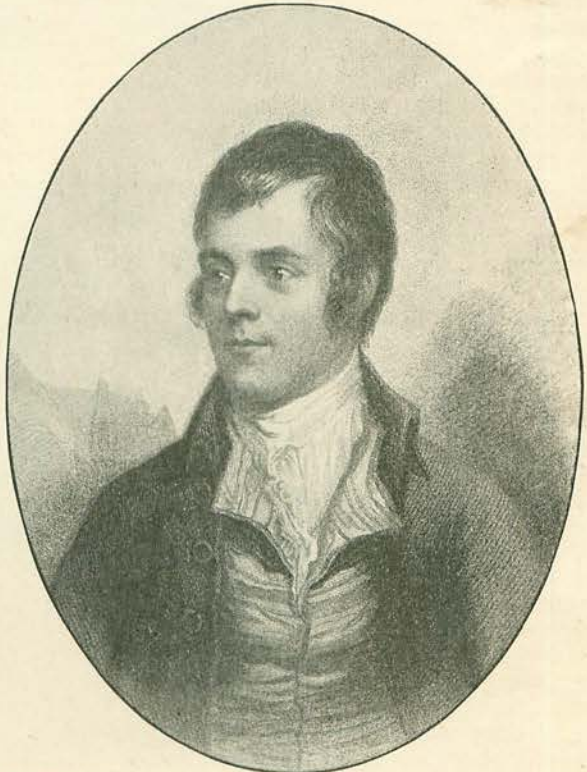
by virtue of which—remembering its brevity and bitterness, and, withal, its marvellous fruitfulness of glorious song—his memory is kept ever green in the heart of posterity.

In the first place, the lot of Burns—in its work-a-day respects—was a hard lot. Toil and penury were largely the portion of the poet. From his earliest years he had more—

pathos and sadness and tragedy. I often think it was in a vein of grimmest irony that he sang of that “blast of Janwar win” that “blew *hansel* in on Robin!” *Hansel*, forsooth! Verily, it was the *hansel* of an untoward destiny that, within the humble, “*auld-clay biggin*,” met his spirit as it entered upon the scene of this mortal life on that tempestuous wintry morning in the year 1759, and remained with him all through his life. The *hansel* was his country’s—not *his*! For never did Scotland receive a nobler gift from the gods than in the genius of this son, and of none is Scotland more proud, unless it be of the great and magnanimous Sir Walter; even he, when a boy, felt it a never-to-be-forgotten honour to be noticed with but a nod and a word from the sad-faced ploughman poet.

In a brief magazine article it is, of course, impossible to do little more than merely touch the fringe, as it were, of such a varied theme as that suggested by the name of Robert Burns. On this the hundredth anniversary of the poet’s death, the temptation to dwell on the more pathetic incidents of his career is not easy to overcome, so that it may, perhaps, be more profitable to the general body of the readers of THE STRAND MAGAZINE to be reminded on such an occasion of some of those more personal features of the poet’s life,

much more in all conscience—than his share of daily toil, and, with only the strength of a lad, had many a day to do the work of a man. Never did a great poet so *hardly* earn his daily bread by the sweat of the brow as did Robert Burns, the boy,



From the Painting by]

ROBERT BURNS.

[Nasmyth.

the youth, the man; and —what is more—never did poet receive, on the whole, a more niggardly dole of that daily bread.

It is true the accredited portraits of Burns give but little, if any, indication of the severe manual labour he underwent for many years, but while the Taylor and the Nasmyth likenesses of the poet, which are reproduced in these pages, are held to be fairly true to the original, the hardnesses or the roughnesses of his features, conditions induced by that manual labour, were no doubt toned down or shaded off in the desire to depict the poet rather than the ploughman. There is, perhaps, too much beautified ideality in the popular portraits of Burns for anyone to discern in his features aught of the sore bodily strain and stress he endured from his earliest years. It is the truth, nevertheless, that few men

had to labour with their hands as did poor Burns, and for so little recompense. Even Flaxman's statue of Burns, which is also given here, with its grace and beauty of design, somehow conveys the impression that the poet was more an elegant "man about town," dressed according to the fashion of the period for some Court levée or high social function, than a wearied plodder after the ploughshare!

Then, there was the penury—the poverty—that perpetually dogged his steps. The wolf, with its horrid snarl, was almost constantly at his door, and to what terrible shifts was poor Burns often put to in



FLAXMAN'S STATUE OF BURNS.



ROBERT BURNS, 1786.
From the Painting by Taylor.

order to keep the enemy at bay! Nothing is more pitiful than the story of the poverty of Scotland's greatest son; all the more pitiful, since it stands out in such sharp contrast to the general thriftiness and providence of the Scottish peasantry, who often take as a text for their rule of daily life the poet's famous lines:—

Not for to hide it in a hedge,
Nor for a train-attendant,
But for the glorious privilege
Of being independent.

Alas, for Burns, the privilege of being independent—so far as hard cash can secure that happy condition—was never really his from the time he began to toil until the "labourer's task was o'er" and for ever. Almost the last letter he penned was one containing an appeal to a friend for help; to save him from a debtor's gaol! Fine songs and noble sentiments about the glory of independence are well enough in their way, but when the poet who sings them has scarce a shilling in the *kist*, while the wife is weariful and the bairns are hungry (and poor Jean Armour had, as Burns himself knew only too well, many a hard time of it!), what an irony of destiny is his in all conscience!

With all this—and more—to vex his soul, Burns, nevertheless, still sang on through it all, and oftentimes in strains of such superlative excellence, and with such matchless *abandon*, that it is all the more amazing to think of the many slings and arrows of the outrageous fortune that was his. This stern schooling has, of course,

done much, especially of late years, to accentuate the popular note of sympathy with Burns and for his failings. As time goes on, I believe it will be more and more realized that never did a great poet endure, as Robert Burns endured; in as brief a span of existence, so much of that concentrated bitterness of human life which poverty alone can distil, while remaining true to the better instincts of a surpassing genius. Under it all, and in spite of the temptations to "kick up the heels" at the iron goad of such a lot as was that of Burns (temptations which, alas, were often too much for him), his genius suffered but little eclipse, and from its rising to its setting, maintained almost its full measure of power to delight and dazzle all that came under its influence.

If to Burns himself, however, the work-a-day discipline of destiny was unwontedly harsh and unkind, his sufferings from "chill penury" at its immediate hands have proved vastly to the benefit of the country and of the



BETTY BURNS—DAUGHTER OF THE POET.
From a Photo. by McLennan & Co., Greenock.

people he loved so well. It is impossible to imagine what "puir auld Scotland" might have been to-day had the destiny of Burns been other than it was—had he been born, say, with the proverbial silver spoon, in a fine "castle o' Cassillis," the son and heir to some "birkie ca'd a lord."

But, thanks to that same destiny, Burns was born a true son of the people, and at a time when a great democratic poet was sorely needed—a voice that would not only plead the cause of the poor, the oppressed and over-toiled at plough or loom, but that would also cry aloud against the shams and hypocrisies of a selfish, sordid, and inglorious age. And in due time, as the singer's sympathy waxed fervent, and his voice was heard loud and resonant, a breath "from freedom's coast" fanned the face of the common people and roused them to the hope of a new life and of the dawn of a happier era. For it is unquestionably the fact that more than one of the great movements which have done so



WIFE AND GRAND-DAUGHTER OF BURNS.
From the Picture by S. McKenzie, R.S.A.

much to improve the lot of the industrial classes of Scotland, and made them, in the mass, what they are to-day—better housed, more enlightened, thriftier, and more independent—in a word, freer and happier than ever they had been in the past, date from the time of Burns; and is it not a significant circumstance that the inception of the great principle of thrift, as embodied in the savings banks, was being put into actual practice about the very time when the poet passed away, and not many miles from Dumfries, where his remains were interred?

It is, perhaps, chiefly because of the deep and tender humanity of Burns which so “went out” to the humbler and poorer classes of the people, and by virtue of which he was enabled to sing so well and so truly of the common events of their simple lives, that his memory is so greatly prized by his countrymen. Yet, in nothing did the poet befriend Scotland so much as in his intense love for her name and character, and in his enthusiasm for her welfare. No doubt, his broad humour and deep pathos, his love of

common things and his sympathy with them, his hatred of cant and show and hypocrisy, his *brotherliness* of feeling and tenderness of regard “for friendship’s sake,” all as diversely exhibited in such poems and songs as the immortal “Tam o’ Shanter,” with its Alloway Kirk horrors; “John Anderson, My Joe, John”; “To a Daisy,” “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” “A Man’s a Man for a’ That,” etc., have, no doubt, been of immense value to the national life and happiness. But it is, perhaps, as a patriot, and patriot-poet, that Burns deserves most gratitude from his countrymen.



JAMES GLENCAIRN BURNS—SON OF THE POET.
From an Original Painting.

A truer patriot than Burns the Scottish nation never had, for his patriotism was of the purest, the sanest kind. He desired, sang, *prayed* for Scotland in a spirit the most devout and fervent, soliciting for her nothing more—but nothing *less*—than the Divine favour in all that concerned her life and progress. In the “Cotter’s Saturday Night”—by many considered the noblest poem Burns ever wrote—that spirit is finely expressed in the following stanza:—

O Thou! who poured the patriotic tide
That streamed through Wallace’s undaunted heart,
Who dared to nobly stem tyrannic pride,
Or nobly die, the second glorious part
(The patriot’s God, peculiarly thou art
His friend, inspirer, guardian, and reward!),
O never, never, Scotia’s realm desert;
But still the patriot, and the patriot bard,
In bright succession rise, her ornament and guard.

Then there is the poet’s gift of the immortal “Scots Wha Hae!” No country under the sun possesses a national anthem like this. How calmly defiant of the foe! how sternly resolute to meet victory or death!—what martial ode is there to compare with this “*Marseillaise*” of Scotland? To hear it sung even “in piping times of peace” by a social gathering of the clans is moving and inspiring enough, and one can only imagine its influence in face of the stern reality of the battle! Long may it be sung only at the festive board! In any event, Scotland is as much indebted to her patriot-poet for “Scots Wha Hae” as for anything else he ever penned. With the story of the shaping into its present well-known form of this magnificent ode, the name of Mr. George Thomson, the musical correspondent of Burns, and



ISABELLA BURNS—SISTER OF THE POET.
From the Painting by W. Bonner, Jun.



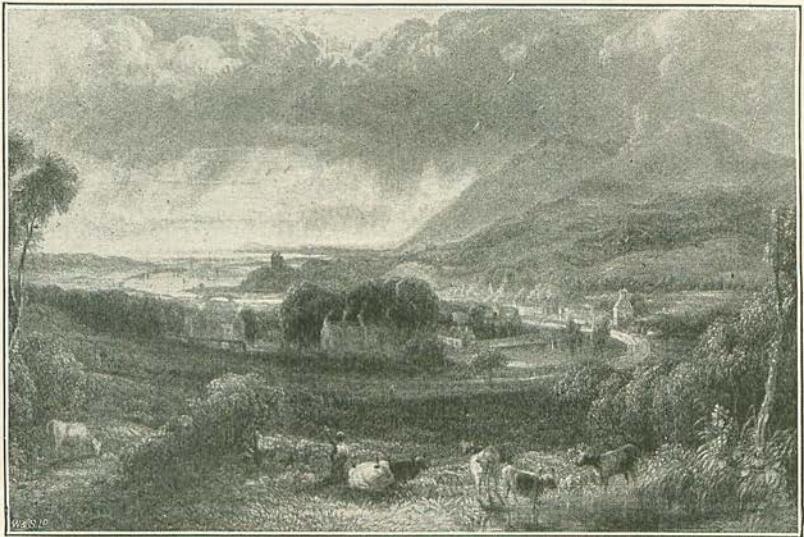
ALLOWAY KIRK—IMMORTALIZED IN "TAM O' SHANTER."
From the Picture by D. O. Hill, R.S.A.

whose portrait is shown on page 54, will ever be honourably associated.

Of the many vicissitudes in the brief life of Robert Burns, none influenced him—the man and the poet—more than his extraordinary experiences in Edinburgh and at the hands of many of the citizens. Was it a happy or unhappy destiny that led Burns to the capital of Scotland, away from his Ayrshire fields, in the autumn of 1786? The question is a most suggestive one, and might well be considered, especially since the present article deals more with the personal side of the poet's career than with his writings.

Looking at the central facts that shaped that career, and remembering the potent influence which the experiences of the life of a great city had upon him—a stranger and untried to its temptations—I am fain sometimes to think that, on the whole, it was an unfortunate destiny that prompted him to quit the quiet, peaceful rusticity of

he suddenly found himself "translated from the veriest shades of life" into a position where he became the cynosure of all eyes. Many men, most men, in fact, would have—in these days at least—shrunk from the ordeal: many, venturing, would have issued from it with their vanity's stature stretched a cubit's length! But Burns did not shrink nor withdraw himself from the scene, neither was he spoiled by the flattering attentions of the great people with whom he foregathered. Indeed, it has been stated, on the authority of Sir Walter Scott, that he "never saw a man in company with his superiors in station



GATEHOUSE—WHERE "SCOTS WHA HAE" WAS COMPOSED.
From the Picture by D. O. Hill, R.S.A.

Mossgiel, where so much of his best work was written, and venture himself into the noisy, soul-vexing whirl of gay city life. True, when he arrived in Edinburgh, heralded as a new poetic star that had lately arisen on the horizon of the time, he, like Cæsar of old, literally "came, saw, and conquered." Ere he had been many days in the city,

or information more perfectly free than was Burns from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment. Burns was much caressed in Edinburgh, but, alas, the efforts made for his relief were exceedingly trifling." What Burns himself thought of it all is, however, left on record in numerous letters to his friends and correspondents, and an excerpt from one of the most interesting of these, showing a facsimile of the poet's characteristic handwriting, is reproduced on this page.



GEORGE THOMSON.
(Musical Correspondent of the Poet)
From the Painting by Sir H. Raeburn, R.A.

With all this and more to prove the natural loftiness of his soul, and allowing for the financial urgency of the need of a new edition of his poems, the advent of Burns in Edinburgh, especially just after the success of the first (Kilmarnock) edition, no doubt helped very materially to stop the flow of verse which had hitherto come in glorious gushes, warbled full and free as he walked behind his plough

amid his Ayrshire fields. If he formed the acquaintance, more or less useful to him afterwards, of not a few of the notabilities of "Mine own romantic town"; if, too, he succeeded in getting a new edition of his poems through the Edinburgh press (rare honour, indeed, for a provincial bard!) and in pocketing some £500 sterling thereby (since this was the main object of the poet's quest, after, of course, the more private and personal reasons that inclined him cityward), was there not also a debtor side of the account?

The poet won his renown—quick, unexampled, universal: he sat him down at ease with lords and their ladies; he danced, gayest of cavaliers, with duchesses, and fascinated them and their daughters as few men had done; he made his book a big success, and so, for a brief time, was richer by far than ever he had been or hoped to be in all

For my own affairs I am in a fair way of becoming as eminent as Thomas a Kempis or John Bunyan. and you may expect henceforth to see my birthday inserted among the wonderful events, in the poor Robin's and Aberdeen Almanacks, along with the black Monday, & the battle of Bothwell bridge. — My lord Glencairn & the Dean of Faculty, M^r J. Erskine, have taken me under their wing; and by all probability I shall soon be the tenth Worthy, and the eighth Wise Man, of the world. Through my lord's influence it is inserted in the records of the Caledonian Hunt that they universally, one & all, subscribe for the 2^d Edition —



MRS. DUNLOP.
(The Famous Friend and Correspondent of Burns.)

his life; and after some flitting hither and thither, to and from the scene of these splendid triumphs—what do we find?

Alas! we are told on the best of all authorities, viz., Burns himself (his letters to Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop, one of the poet's truest friends and admirers, are the best comment on this subject), that in due time he returned to his Ayrshire home, where many responsibilities and duties awaited him—soured in spirit, hurt in mind, sad at heart, and, in the poetic sense, bearing with him the evidences of

That little rift within the lute
That by-and-bye doth make the music mute!

For certainly—and there is little profit in reciting the details—the rare-toned lute of Robert Burns was none the better for the moral tear and wear the poet underwent in Edinburgh. His Edinburgh life may form an interesting picture for the mind's eye to ponder: on the whole, it is full of pathos and is not without its lessons; and on an occasion like this, the brief life of the poet cannot well pass before the mind without a suggestion of the vanity of all human things being vividly impressed upon it.

Any appreciation of Robert Burns, no matter how brief and inadequate, would, of course, be absurdly incomplete without some reference to the influence of womankind upon

this marvellously gifted and strangely constituted being. What an intensely interesting "human document" might be made of the subject of the poet's relations with the fairer sex! To their influence, no mortal—certainly no poet—was more impressionable than Burns; and all his life, at least from the day when, a lad of fifteen, he was inspired by the charms of "Handsome Nell" Kilpatrick to indite his first love-song, he lived virtually

Under the lash of a lovely eye
In passion—feter'd slavery!

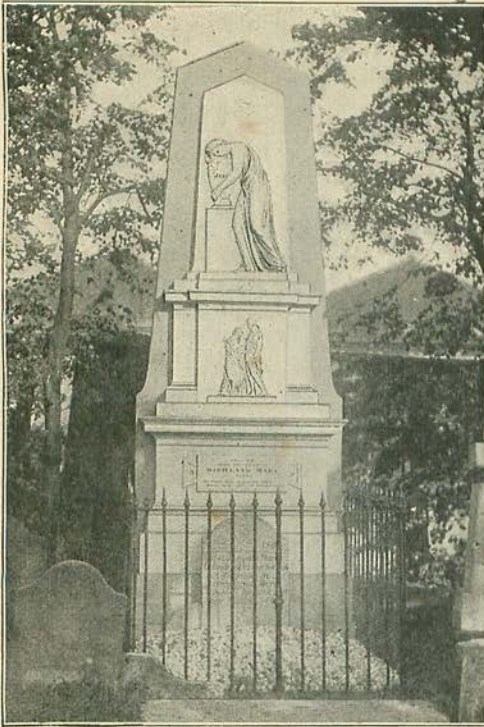
Dante, Tasso, Shakespeare, Goethe, Byron, Shelley, and other singers no doubt owed much of their inspiration and utterance to the potent spell of feminine loveliness and grace, but none of those "mighty minstrels" ever outdid Burns in the ardency and constancy of his song in praise of womankind. Of all those of the gentler sex, however, who most influenced his muse and roused it to the very ecstasy of poetic rapture were (after his own "Bonnie Jean")

Mary Morrison and Mary Campbell—the latter immortalized as no real flesh-and-blood heroine of song has ever been since Scots minstrelsy began to have a history.

The song which Burns wrote in memory



ARCHIBALD CAMPBELL.
(Nephew of Highland Mary.)
From a Photo. by McLennan & Co., Greenock.



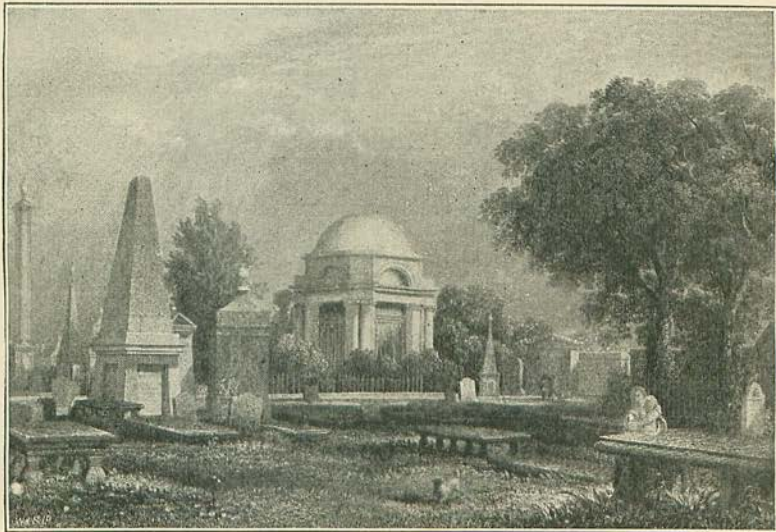
THE GRAVE OF HIGHLAND MARY.
From a Photograph.

of the former may not, perhaps, be so well known as that written to "Mary in Heaven"; yet Hazlitt—an admirable critic—thought it the finest love-song Burns ever penned. But

it is around the name of "Highland Mary" (as "Highland" as birth at Campbelton can make her), with her brief and pathetic history, that by far the more interesting associations have gathered, and whatever may have been the precise nature of the poet's intimacy with her, there never can be any doubt of the fact that her untoward fate deeply wounded the heart of Burns, and provoked from him some of the noblest lines in the language. For example, the stanza, ending :—

*Time but the impression deeper makes,
As streams their channels deeper wear,*

has on many an occasion been quoted as unequalled alike for the stateliness of the flow of the language and the excellence of the simile expressed. In connection with the name of Highland Mary, many admirers of Burns will be interested to know that there was living as recently as December last, and, in spite of his eighty-three years, in fairly good health, a nephew of that famous celebrity. It is now well beyond a hundred years (the actual date is 17th August, 1786) since Mary Campbell met her death at Greenock, where she had been attending a sick brother, and where—in the West churchyard—her remains are interred. In this nephew, therefore (whose portrait is shown on the previous page), we had a very interesting link, directly connected with the fair heroine for whose memory all lovers of their national bard have naught but a tender and respectful regard.



THE MAUSOLEUM OF BURNS IN DUMFRIES.
From the Picture by D. O. Hill, R.S.A.