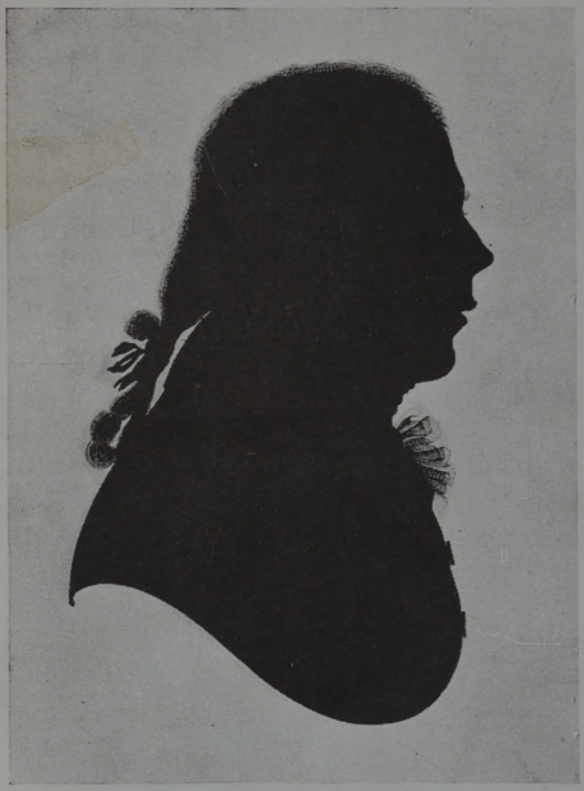
# The Humanity of Burns

BY THE

HON. JAMES CRAIGIE.



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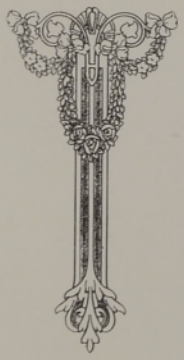

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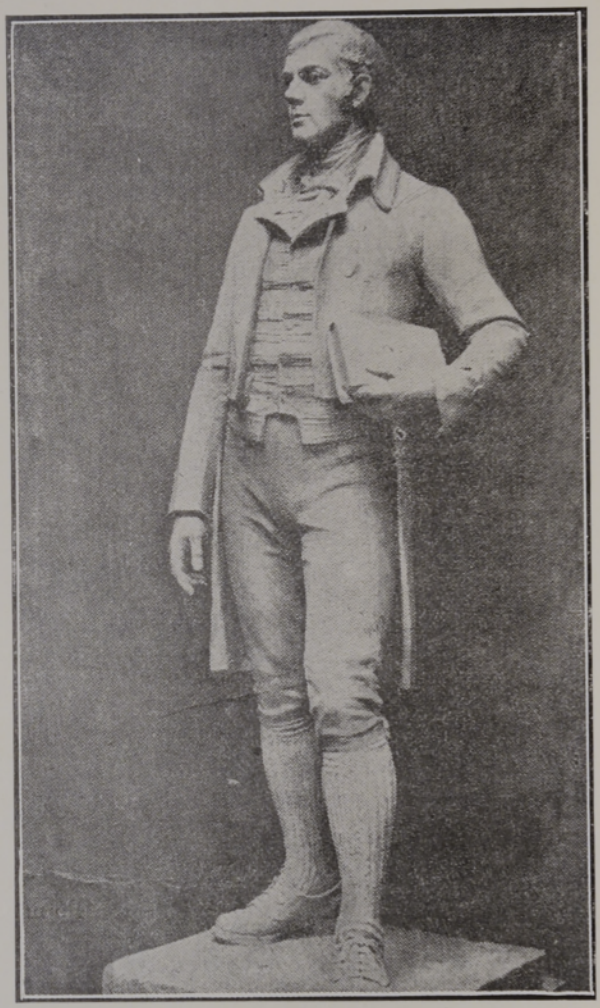


THE LATEST STATUE OF ROBERT BURNS.
Unveiled at Gilchrist Park, Cheyenne, Wyoming, U.S.A

# The Humanity of Burns

by the

## Hon. James Craigie

*Being the substance of a Lecture delivered by the Hon. James Craigie, at the Inaugural Meeting of the Wellington Burns Club, in the Concert Chamber, Town Hall, Wellington, February 25th, 1931.*

I TRUST that no one has come here expecting to listen to a "brilliant oration" from me. To borrow Burns' own words, "Sic flights are far beyond my power." But there is one thing I can do, and I do. I come with a grateful heart to lay my sprig of laurel on the poet's tomb.

My address will be more of an informative nature than an attempt at eloquence. It is very difficult to say anything new about Burns, or to add to what has already been said. Who could say anything original now about the poet would need to have a genius not unequal to his own. Since his death a mighty literature has grown up around and about him. No other writer in the space of the last or any century has had so many editions of his works published; has had so many biographers, so many essayists, commentators, critics, telling the story of his life, praising, elucidating and analysing his work: and, I regret to add, too, so many muck-rakers, as Burns has had.

Within twenty or thirty years after his death, a prodigality of poets came on the stage, notable among which were Byron and Scott. Byron, with his brilliant, audacious verse, made a sensation. He captivated the reading public, especially the young men. These imitated him in his attire, wearing the Byron collar and necktie. Some tried to contract his melancholy pose. They were Byronic in everything—save genius. Scott's rhymes were learned and declaimed from Land's End to John o' Groat's. But after the middle of last century the glamour faded and, though not forgotten, they are not read as they were, say, eighty years ago. Burns has been dead 134 years and his fame, instead of declining, has grown and continues to grow. To speak figuratively, his torch has increased and is increasing in volume and brilliancy.

We might well apply to Burns the words of the Roman poet, Horace, who flourished two thousand years ago, for Burns, like

Horace, was conscious that his name would live through many centuries. Horace said of himself:—

> I have built a monument more enduring than bronze, and loftier than the Royal Pyramids, that no wasting rain or wild wind can destroy; nor the flight of time and the countless chain of years. I shall not wholly die; the better part of me shall escape the Goddess of Death.

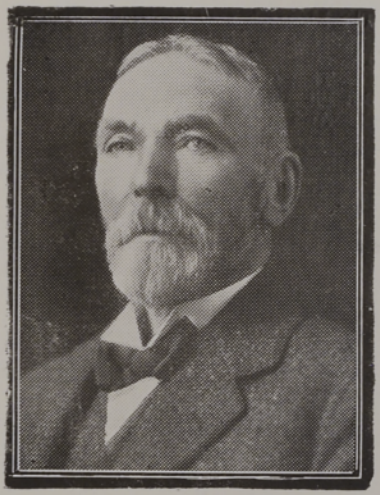
That is applicable to Burns. And the better part of him will live for many centuries to come.

The subject of my address is "The Humanity of Burns"; but, before dealing with that phase of Burns' writings, I should like to refer to the wonderful and numerous manifestations of affection that have been paid to Burns' memory. These tributes have taken many forms. It has been asserted that there are more statues to Burns than to any other man who has lived on this earth. They are scattered all over the world. The United States of America boasts that there are more statues to Burns in that country than there are in Scotland. But America is a vast country compared with Scotland, with over twenty times the population. We know that the people of the United States have a great regard and love for Burns.

Not only have statues and monuments been erected to the poet; but monuments and memorials have been erected to men and women who came into Burns' life—these, also, are, though indirect, tributes to Burns' memory.

Let us take the example of the Earl of Glencairn. When Burns gave the first fruits of his genius to the world through the little Kilmarnock press, his fame was winged through Scotland. Copies of this Kilmarnock edition reached the hands of some of Edinburgh's literary men, who realised at once that a genius had appeared in the land in the person of a working farmer. They wrote to friends in Burns' neighbourhood, telling them to advise Burns to proceed to Edinburgh and bring out a better and bigger edition of his poems in that city. Burns took the advice of his many well-wishers, and proceeded to the Capital. He arrived there on a November night, 1786, without a single letter of introduction. The second night after his arrival he attended the Kilwinning Masonic Lodge, where he met some of Edinburgh's prominent men, among whom was the Earl of Glencairn. Glencairn showed Burns great kindness and treated him as a brother, nothing patronising—Burns would not have stood that. The Earl did everything in his power to make the Edinburgh edition of Burns' works a success, by getting a great number of subscribers before publication, besides introducing Burns to the homes of the great and the learned.

Some two years before Burns' death, the Earl went to Spain to escape the rigours of the English winter, and on returning died on board his ship outside Falmouth Harbour, and was buried at that



S. P. Andrew, Photo.

HON. JAMES CRAIGIE

town. Not many years ago, it was brought under the notice of the Burns' Federation that no monument or tombstone had been placed over the Earl's resting-place. Through the Federation a monument was erected, worthy of the man who befriended Burns and who assisted to make the famous Edinburgh edition a success and profitable to the poet.

I must mention that all who knew the Earl were sincerely grieved at his death. So was Burns; but Burns did more. He showed his regard for the noble man by composing that fine poem, "Lament for James Earl of Glencairn," the last verse of which is as follows:—

The Bridegroom may forget the Bride
Was made his wedded wife yestreen;
The Monarch may forget the crown
That on his head an hour has been;
The mother may forget the bairn
That smiles sae sweetly on her knee;
But I'll remember thee, Glencairn,
And a' that thou hast done for me.

Mary Campbell—Burns' Highland Mary—died and was buried at Greenock. Some six years ago, the old graveyard where she lay, was cut into for the construction of a great dry-dock, and Mary Campbell's grave, along with others, had to be disturbed. Her dust and contents of her grave were reverently taken up and re-buried in the presence of a great concourse of people.

Those who have sailed down the Clyde will have seen from the boat the fine statue erected to Mary Campbell, at her birth place, near the water-front, at Dunoon. A few years ago, a monument was erected on the banks of the river Ayr near Montgomery Castle, where, according to his pathetic ode, "To Mary in Heaven," and his beautiful song, "Highland Mary," they spent their last Sabbath together—for they were destined, though they knew it not, never to meet in this world again. They plighted their troth that day, observing the old Scots custom of exchanging Bibles over running water. The Bible that Burns gave Mary has been found, and is now priceless, as it has a characteristic inscription in Burns' own hand-writing. The Bible Mary gave Burns, so far, has not been found. Mary Campbell went to her cousins at Greenock to prepare for the marriage, but she died within three months after her arrival there. Burns has left us those tender lines "Highland Mary," which he composed after her death.

How sweetly bloom'd the gay, green birk,
How rich the hawthorn's blossom,
As underneath their fragrant shade
I clasped her to my bosom.
The golden hours, on angel wings,
Flew o'er me and my dearie;
For dear to me, as light and life,
Was my sweet Highland Mary.

Wi' mony a vow and lock'd embrace,
Our parting was fu' tender;
And, pledging aft, to meet again,
We tore oursels asunder;
But, oh, fell death's untimely frost,
That nipt my flower sae early—
Now green's the sod, and cauld's the clay,
That wraps my Highland Mary.

Oh, pale, pale now, those rosy lips,
I aft hae kissed sae fondly.
And clos'd for aye, the sparkling glance
That dwelt on me sae kindly.
And mouldering now in silent dust
That heart that lo'ed me dearly—
But still within my bosom's core
Shall live my Highland Mary.

Let me give another example of the love of the people for Burns. At the beginning of this century, the Auld Brig of Ayr was condemned by the City Authorities to be demolished as unsafe for public traffic. But, the admirers—no, the lovers—of Burns, led by the late Lord Rosebery, declared that that bridge should not perish. Why? For the simple reason that Burns had written a unique poem in the form of a dialogue between the Auld and New Brigs that span the River Ayr as it passes through the city of that name. Ample funds were soon subscribed (amounting to £12,000) to enable the Brig to be renovated and strengthened. This done the Brig would be safe for generations to come. Some enthusiast declared that if the material required to reinforce the Brig had had to be of precious metal, it would have been found.

The dialogue supposed to take place between the Twa Brigs at midnight, waxes warm and lively. The spirit of the Auld Brig, like old age speaking to youth, decries the New Brig's showy and flimsy architecture; it looks upon it as an upstart. The New Brig taunts the old one with its clumsy, rude and wrinkled, out-of-date appearance. The poet makes the Auld Brig, in four lines, utter a prophecy:

Conceited gowk, puff'd up wi' windy pride.
This mony a year I've stood the flood an' tide;
And tho' wi' crazy eild, I'm sair forfairn,
I'll be a brig, when ye're a shapeless cairn.

Sure enough, the prophecy came true, for, eighty years after Burns wrote these lines, the New Brig did succumb to "the flood and tide." The Auld Brig looks as if it would endure for centuries to come.

Was there ever such homage paid to any other poet, ancient or modern? Numerous tributes have been paid to Burns' memory, but time will not permit me to dwell on these. His birthplace, "The Auld clay biggin," has become one of the world's shrines. Tens of thousands, nay, more like ten times ten thousands, yearly visit that humble cot, hailing from all parts of the world. The walls, partly of stone and partly of clay, mostly clay, were built by his father's own hands. We are told that on the second day after his birth, a great storm blew in the end wall. The mother, with her infant, had

to seek shelter amidst the storm, in a neighbour's house. Shall we say that this was emblematic and prophetic of the poet's short and tempestuous life. Robert Ingersol's description of this dwelling is very fine:—

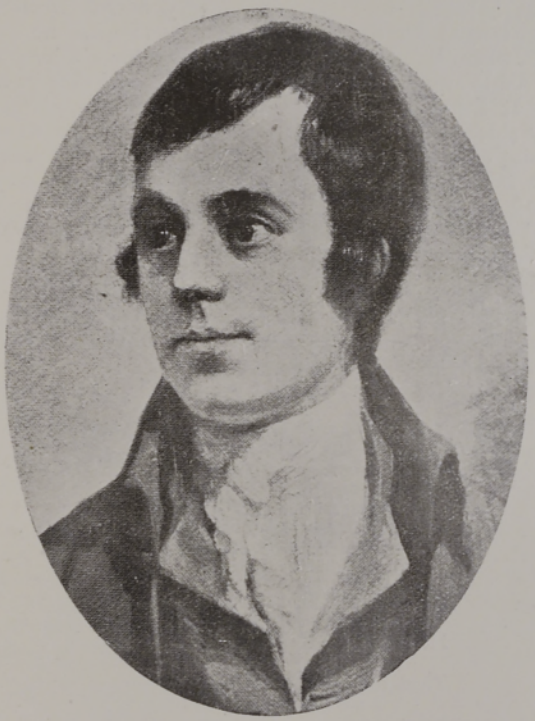
'Tis but a cot roofed in with straw,
A hovel made of clay,
One door shuts out the snow and storm,
One window greets the day;
And yet I stand within this room,
And hold all thrones in scorn,
For here, beneath this lowly thatch,
Love's sweetest bard was born.

Burns started writing when he was in his "teens," but did not take to it seriously till in his 'mid twenties. What he wrote from then to his twenty-seventh year was published in the Kilmarnock edition; brilliant work when we consider its volume and quality. Burns never sat down to write a line for money. He had many friends who recognised his genius, and he was generous in making copies of his poems and sending them to these friends, who no doubt expressed their appreciation, not only of his kindness, but of his genius. Some of these admirers were lawyers, clergymen, and gentlemen of title.

These manuscripts of Burns' are eagerly sought after now. They are precious treasures and change owners at fabulous prices. Many, too many, of these manuscripts have gone to the United States—gold will tell. Two thousand pounds have been paid for a short letter containing one song, just because it was written by Burns' own hand. The educated Americans are great lovers of the poet.

The anniversary of his birth is celebrated throughout the English-speaking world. We can safely say that Robert Burns has a home in more hearts than any other man that has lived, except Him Who was born in the stable and cradled in a manger. There is no parallel in the history of literature, where a poet's name is so often on the tongue of all the people. The question might well be asked, and should be asked: What is the reason or secret of this universal love of Burns? Philosophers tell us that for every effect there must be a cause—"Cause and effect." In Burns' case, it might well suit philosophy to tell us why this love for Burns is so world-wide, so emphatic, so lasting.

I humbly venture to suggest that one of the reasons, perhaps the greatest reason, why this love of Burns is so general, is because of Burns' great humanity, his glowing humanity. Burns' sympathies are universal. He had a great affection for all living creatures. Burns made no parade of his goodness. He had, what we call, the true spirit of Christianity. It gives us a key to his feelings and sympathy for the poor and down-trodden, when we know that his favourite gospel text was from "Revelation"—"God shall wipe away tears from all eyes, and there shall be no more sorrowing or crying." In quoting these words in his letters, he added that he wished he had the power to wipe away tears. In one of his letters to his friend, Mrs. Dunlop,



ROBIN

he tells her that his creed is, "Whatever lessens the woes, and increases the happiness of others, that is my criterion of goodness." A very noble creed!

I admire the occupier of the pulpit of the City Temple in London, who a few years ago, in speaking on a Burns' Anniversary, told his congregation that he had spent time in searching for and reading the published sermons preached at the time Burns lived, and that he found truer Christianity in Burns' poems and songs than in all the sermons of that day that he could bear to read.

Burns held the true Christian theory of the Brotherhood of Man, and longed for the time when "man to man the world o'er" would "brothers be for a' that." I fear we have a long way to go e'er that noble aspiration is realised. Let us hope that we are getting nearer. If Burns was alive to-day, his heart would thrill at the evidently sincere desire of the people of all nations to reduce the present size of armies and navies, and that the differences that may arise between Powers be settled by peaceful methods, instead of by brutalising war—such as was that we now refer to as "the Great War." Burns hated war and named it murder. If he was alive to-day, we know which side his mighty pen would aid.

In his address to the "Unco Guid" (which in Scots, means more than its English equivalent "Very Good"), he shows his wonderful insight into human nature. Therein he breathes the true spirit of Christ. No nobler plea for human charity was ever uttered by mortal man than that in the last two verses of that poem:—

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Though they may gang a' kennin wrang,
To step aside is human:
One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving why they do it;
And just as lamely can ye mark
How far, perhaps, they rue it.

Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us;
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring its various bias:
Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.

Why, the poet's charity extends even to the De'il himself. In his "Address to the De'il," with his humorous banter, he gives his Satanic Majesty a bad time; but at his leave-taking, he parts with him thus:—

But, fare-you-weel, Auld Nickie-ben,
O wad ye tak' a thought an' men',
Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—
Still hae a stake;
I'm wae to think upo' yon den,
E'en for your sake.

How happily and tenderly does he depict the affection of an old couple at the end of a long life, in that simple song, "John Anderson, My Jo." May I remind you that "Jo" is not a man's name, but an old Scots endearing word just as you say, "My dear," or "My love."

John Anderson, my Jo, John,
When we were first acquent;
Your locks were like the raven;
Your bonnie brow was brent;
But now your brow is beld, John,
Your locks are like the snaw;
But blessings on your frosty pow,
John Anderson, my Jo.

John Anderson, my Jo, John,
We clamb the hill thegither;
And mony a cantie day, John,
We've had wi' ane anither;
Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go;
And sleep thegither at the foot,
John Anderson, my Jo."

That little song is worth more than all our modern morbid sex novels. If there were more Mr. and Mrs. John Andersons, our divorce judges would have less business to put through.

What man, boy or girl, could be cruel to dumb animals after reading his "Twa Dogs," "The Auld Farmer's New Year Greetings to his Auld Mare, Maggie," his address "To the Field Mouse," the dying words of his pet ewe and others?

The "Twa Dogs" might well be named an original, kindly poem, detailing an imaginary conversation between two dogs on a summer's afternoon. One is a dog from the rich man's mansion, the other from the poor, toiling man's home. They had evidently met before. After they had had some romping and nosing together, they lay down in the warm sunshine and began to talk about what goes on in their respective homes. There is no class distinction between dogs. Among other things talked about, the poor man's dog tells that the inmates in the toiling man's humble dwelling are happy and contented.

But how it comes, I never kent yet,
They're maistly wonderfu' contented:
And buirdly chiels and clever hizzies,
Are bred in sic a way as this is.

Caesar, the rich people's dog, gives a graphic description of the ongoings in the mansion, but wonders how poor, hard-working folk can endure life under the conditions in which they are placed, and the manner in which they are treated by the dwellers in the mansion:

But then to see how ye're negleckit,
How puff'd and cuff'd and disrespeckit,
Lord, man, our gentry care as little
For delvers, ditchers and sic cattle,
They gang as saucy by poor folk
As I would by a stinking brock.

How Burns could detail how the idle rich spent their time, or rather wasted it, is the wonder of many. "It's not all pure gold that glitters."

Luath, the poor man's dog, vividly tells what takes place in the lowly home on the old Scots festive day of the year:—

That merry day the year begins,
They bar the door on frosty win's;
The nappy reeks wi' mantling ream,
And sheds a heart-inspiring steam;
The luntin pipe, and sneethin' mill.
Are handed round wi' right guidwill;
The cantie auld folks crackin' crouse,
The young anes rantin' thro' the house—
My heart has been sae fain to see them,
That I for joy hae barkit wi' them.

As the sun is beginning to sink behind the hill, the dogs conclude that it is time for them to be getting to their homes. They have evidently agreed that their lot is a happier one than that of their masters':—

When up they gat, and shook their lugs,
Rejoiced they were na men, but dogs.

In his "Twa Dogs," "Man was Made to Mourn," and his great song, "A Man's a Man," you will get the essence of Burns' social philosophy, and a great humane philosophy it is.

I must say something about the "Old Farmer and his Mare, Maggie." "Maggie" was bred on the little farm, and, when young, was a dapple grey; but is now snow-white and her back is hallowed with the evidence of old age. The mare has been a very valuable servant, and profitable with the number of her progeny. The old man has a great affection for her. He does not send her to the tan-pits to get a few shillings for her hide, or sell her to some hawker or cadger to be underfed, as often happens, and cruelly ill-used. No, she is pensioned off, and is allowed to wander about the fields for as long as she lives. On New Year's morning, it was his custom to take a sheaf of unthrashed oats to her, a luxury for the festive day. According to the poem, the first thing he does—likely before he partakes of his morning porridge—is to go to the stable and greet his old mare:—

A guid New Year I wish thee, Maggie,
Hae, there's a ripp to thy auld baggie;
Tho' thou's howe-back't now and knaggie,
I've seen the day
Thou could hae gaen like ony staggie
Oot-owe the lay.

We can see the old man patting his mare, reminding her of the great things they had done at the plough or in the cart; how she used to carry him safely home on market nichts when he was perhaps a little mellow, and how she proudly carried his bride to their new home. At the end of his long list of the great things

THE MOTHER OF ROBERT BURNS

they did, he gives this impression of his big, kind heart before he leaves:—

We've worn to crazy years thegither;
We'll toyte about wi' ane anither;
Wi' tentie care, I'll flit thy tether,
To some hain'd rig,
Whare ye may nobly rax your leather,
Wi' sma' fatigue.

No one could have written that poem who had not a kind, humane heart, and, surely, Burns, if any man had, had that.

One early winter's day, as he ploughs the stubble field, the plough turns up the little field mouse's nest. Its house that it had made to shelter itself for the coming winter months, was destroyed. The lad, whose duty it was to lead the foremost horse, also carried a miniature spade called the pattle of the plough, to scrape, when necessary, the soil off the mould board of the plough. The boy saw the affrighted little creature running away, and, as most boys would do, he ran to kill it with the pattle. Burns called him back, and told him to leave the mouse alone. As Burns continued his ploughing, he conceived and partly composed his exquisite "Address to the Mouse" —one of the gems of our language. No better illustration could be given in showing Burns' kind, feeling heart. He calls the mouse his "earth-born companion and fellow mortal." No class distinction about that.

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie,
Oh, what a panic's in thy breastie.
Thou need na start awa' sae hasty,
Wi' bickerin' brattle.
I wad be laith to rin and chase thee,
Wi' murdering pattle.

I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion
Which mak's thee startle
At me, thy poor earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal. . .

Thou saw the fields laid bare and waste,
An' weary winter coming fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell.
Till crash, the cruel coulter past
Out thro' thy cell. . .

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble
Has cost thee mony a weary nibble.
Now thou's turned out for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
And cranreuch cauld.

But, mousie, thou are no' thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain
For promised joy.

Still thou art blessed, compar'd wi' me,
The present only toucheth thee;
But, och, I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear;
An', forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear.

There are other examples I could quote to show Burns' kindness for dumb animals, but the foregoing must suffice.

The poet had a friend whose son was entering into young manhood, and Burns, though only twenty-seven years of age himself, wrote and sent the youth an epistle of thirteen verses, entitled, "Advice to a Young Friend." This advice might well be bracketed with Polonius' advice to his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare's play of "Hamlet." Burns' advice is as sound as that Shakespeare puts in Polonius' mouth to give his son. Polonius' advice is of the cold, worldly kind. He advises his son "neither a borrower nor a lender be." If some of us had followed that precept, we might have had more money in our pockets to-day, but less human sympathy in our hearts. Burns' advice is more humane, kinder and, I must say, more Christian. It is hard for some individuals to resist helping the less fortunate. In one verse he has a plea for the unfortunate, who have been failures in the eyes of the world:—

Yet they wha fa' in fortune's strife,
Their fate we should na censure,
For still, th' important end of life
They equally may answer;
A man may ha'e an honest heart,
Tho' poortith hourly stare him;
A man may tak' a neibor's part,
Yet ha'e nae cash to spare him.

St. Paul tells us that "Charity suffereth long and is kind. Charity never faileth." Robert Burns undoubtedly belonged to that congregation. In his poem, "A Winter Night," he utters kind, humane sentiments, displaying his tender heart for the poor and needy. If any of the audience should be debarred from attending church through one cause or another (excuses come easy in these days) they cannot do better than take down their Burns (I trust you all have copies), and read carefully his "Winter Night." You will find it to be the next best thing to a good sermon.

In this poem he tells us, that, as he sits by his fireside on a wild winter's night, he thinks of the poor dumb animals, who are exposed to the terrible elements. He says:—

List'ning, the doors an' winnocks rattle,
I thought me on the ourie cattle
Or silly sheep, wha bide this brattle
O' winter war,
And thro' the drift, deep-lairing sprattle,
Beneath a scaur.

Ilk happing bird, wee, helpless thing,
That in the merry months of spring,
Delighted me to hear thee sing,
What comes o' thee?
Whare wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing,
An' close thy e'e?

Farther down in the poem, he asks for sympathy for the unbefriended:

Oh, ye, who, sunk in beds of down,
Feel not a want but what yourselves create,
Think, for a moment, on his wretched fate,
Whom friends and fortune quite disown. . .

Affliction's sons are brothers in distress,
A brother to relieve, how exquisite the bliss. . .

But deep this truth impressed my mind—
Through all His works abroad,
The heart benevolent and kind
The most resembles God.

I reluctantly close on this phase of the writings of Burns, by repeating again, that Burns' glowing humanity is one of the reasons why he has a home in the hearts of so many millions of men and women. The affection in which he is so universally held, is only the reflex of his own kindness of heart. Likely there are, and have been, individuals whose humanity equalled that of Burns' but without Burns' gifts of expression. Burns, even with his genius, without his humanity, would have been admired, but would not have won the love of mankind such as is his to-day.

In conclusion, we join with Carlyle and say that Burns needs no one to plead for him.

> In pitying admiration he lies enshrined in all our hearts, in a far nobler mausoleum than that one of marble; neither will his works, even as they are, pass away from the memory of men. While the Shakespeares and Miltons roll on like mighty rivers through the country of Thought, bearing fleets of traffickers and assiduous pearl-fishers on their waves; this little Valclusa Fountain will also arrest our eye. For this also is of Nature's own and most cunning workmanship, bursts from the depths of the earth, with a full gushing current into the light of day, and often will the traveller turn aside to drink of its clear waters, and muse among its rocks and pines.

So spoke Thomas Carlyle, the countryman and lover of Robert Burns. Let us now hear what one—not his countryman, but the most searching and incisive of his critics—W. E. Henley—says concerning him:—

> Burns' voice has gone ringing through the courts of Time for a hundred years and more, and has become far louder and clearer than when it first broke on the ear of Man.

---

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***c/o G.P.O. Box 626***
***Wellington.***




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