



ONE hundred and seventy-two years have come and gone since the young wife of a working gardener gave birth to her first child in an "auld clay biggin" near the town of Ayr. Nature afforded a cold and tempestuous welcome to the infant boy, and his life's journey of thirty-seven years was beset with troubles. His wanderings hardly extended beyond the confines of his native land: He strove with unfruitful soil and searched old wives' barrels, and left behind him only a little more of material possession than he brought. Now, the glory of his name is spread as wide as the world, and no son of Scotland has homage in comparison. As Sir James Barrie once said, "They have all to take the kerb for the exciseman."

On every anniversary of Robert Burns's birth countless thousands of his lovers keep a tryst with him, not only in the Old Country, but in the great Scotland beyond the seas. He is admitted by the highest authorities to have been the first poetic genius of the eighteenth century, but his countrymen do not base their devotion on literary attainments alone. It is the place he has in their hearts by which they judge him.

As a growing boy he had a man's task, and the ploughman's stoop was fashioned which went with him all his life. He says himself that there was the "cheerless gloom of the hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley slave," but though his youth was hard and anxious it was a necessary prelude to his message.

THE shadow of poverty hung ever over his father's door, but he was brought up in surroundings of almost unrivalled natural charm, and his young heart was early stirred by the magic beauty of the world. He did not get more than three years' schooling, snatched at random from the time he could be spared from the labours of the field, but the impression which still persists that he was an unlettered peasant is entirely erroneous. He was extraordinarily well-informed, thanks to his father's efforts and his own intense desire for knowledge. He only lacked opportunity to acquire an advanced culture. In such a process he might have been robbed of the gay spontaneity which is his chief charm. We cannot, somehow or other, imagine him walking on academic stilts along the highway of life.

*Gie me ae spark o' nature's fire,  
That's a' the learning I desire,  
Then though I drudge through dub and mire,  
At plough or cart,  
My muse though hamely in attire  
May touch the heart.*

A succession of unsuccessful farming ventures—a brief period in which he was feted

and lionised at Edinburgh, which was then one of the leading social and literary centres in Europe—three and a half years in Nithsdale, where he tried without avail to combine the dual role of farmer and exciseman—and four and a half years in Dumfries, where he wrote songs of incomparable beauty and served the Excise Board for £70 a year, is the story of his life.

It has been the fashion to look upon it as a tragedy. Biographers and essayists have almost without exception mourned over him, but it is not improbable that the only tragedy was the supreme final one when death claimed him so early in his days. It is fortunate for us that he is his own best biographer. Bookish and unworldly men have failed to grasp the essential fact that he was a perfectly normal person with all the eccentricities of conduct and flaws of temperament which distinguish our kind.

It was not altogether easy for a literary artist of the first order, who knew always how to think but not always how to live, to accommodate himself to the discreet atmosphere of a country town in a time of extreme political dissension. It is indeed a matter for wonder that in his lifetime he created so great a stir as he did, and Nathaniel Hawthorne is right in saying that "It is far easier to know and honour a poet when his fame has taken shape in the spotlessness of marble than when the actual man comes staggering before you besmeared with the stains of his daily life."

It is by the glorious heritage which he has left us that we must judge Burns. He succeeded to a splendid inheritance. From the earliest unknown singers, right through the long line of Barbour and Blind Harry, King James the First—Dunbar—Douglas—Ramsay—and Ferguson, there had come to him an unbroken tradition of natural spiritual expression. He was fortunate in that he became its possessor so early in life. The collection of Scottish songs was, he says, "My vade mecum. I pored over them walking to labour line by line and verse by verse"; and he gathered round him the memories and traditions of his native land "till they became a mantle and a crown."

When he came, literary taste was artificial and effeminate, and poor, storm-racked Scotland was in peril of losing the individuality of her natural utterance.

With a wave of the magician's hand he changed it all. What had seemed vulgar and commonplace before, because it belonged to the everyday life of the thought and speech and action, became transfigured and appeared in the true beauty of its natural proportion by the touch of his genius.

He is the most natural of poets, as he was the most natural of men. He speaks in the language of everyday life. No training in the schools is (Concluded on page 32.)

#### A Programme in Celebration of



ROBERT BURNS

(Born January 25, 1759).

All stations will broadcast special Burns programmes on the evening of Saturday, January 24. Highlanders in the four centres will provide concerts, and the programmes, to use the expression of Burns, "will drive on wi' songs and clatter."

#### AT AUCKLAND

Auckland District Highland Pipe Band.

#### FROM WELLINGTON

Caledonian Society's concert will be relayed.

#### FROM CHRISTCHURCH

Caledonian Pipe Band.

#### AT DUNEDIN

Dunedin Burns Club, and assisting artists.