

As part of #Raiders125, The Galloway Raiders brings you S.R.Crockett's 'Immortal Memory' from The Scottish Metropolitan Burns Club at a dinner at the Waterloo Hotel (as reported in *The Scotsman*, Jan 26th 1894).

The Rev. Mr Crockett on rising to propose the toast of the evening, 'The Immortal Memory of Burns' was received with great applause. He said - I felt myself both 'owre young an' ower blate to undertake a duty so ancient and honorable as that which is involved in proposing the Immortal memory, at the Metropolitan Burns Club of Scotland on the night of the festival of Saint Robin. But when I hesitated, standing a wee in a swither, the office was strongly pressed upon me by your excellent secretary Mr Alexander Anderson, a poet himself, who would have done the duty far better than I. But they that will to Cupar maun to Cupar. A 'Surfaceman' poet called me to speak to the ploughman poet's praise, and being a Scot, how could I be recreant? Besides, the 'Surfaceman' is an exceedingly 'buidrly chiel', and I am a man of peace. So I said 'Yes,' because I did not know what might have happened if I had said 'No.' A little bird whispered to me that the Burns Club needs some gowden guineas to help to pay the piper after a certain ploy in the Music Hall. My advice is that the club depute their secretary to interview the wealthier members of their organisation one by one - in a quiet upper chamber somewhere - and allow him full discretionary powers and no questions asked. The piper would soon be paid, with maybe a nest-egg over forbye to cheer the heart of the treasurer. (Laughter) yet it is a task almost unique in its difficulty to which your generous kindness has called me. You ask me to call to your remembrance that which is eternally unforgotten and unforgettable. You ask me to express in your presence some of those deeper and stronger feelings which lie at the roots of our natures. We Scots are naturally reticent, and on any other subject than Robert Burns we can hardly be accused of carrying our hearts upon our sleeves. Yet in this place, and on this occasion, Burns has been so often eulogised that it would be unfitting and presumptuous in me simply to add one more paean. The time has long gone past when eulogies were useful literary products, and I have not the art to make them ornamental. But on the other hand, it were still more out of place to say a word in dispraise of him whose head lies now these hundred years, nearly down by where the Nith water slips under the bridges of Dumfries. God forbid that tonight we should cast one stone at so noble a publican as Robert Burns! Moreover, it is the right of every Briton to be tried by his peers; and when Robert Burns is condemned by the ignorant or the prejudiced, it is within his right to claim the inalienable right of appeal, and to say - 'I stand at Caesar's judgment seat.' Before whom, then, shall Robert Burns 'thole his assize, if not before his brethren the poets?' (Applause) Who but they are his peers? Let us empanel a jury of tow - a small one, it is true - but then, though few, exceedingly fit, and even to some extent representative. Moreover they shall be Christian poets - avowedly so by sympathy and faith. If William Wordsworth speaks for Britain and JOhn Greenleaf Whittier for America, neither country has reason to be ashamed of its representative (Applause) These two men are, distinctly and typically, the poets of the Christian morality, if not at its broadest, at least in its sincerest and most uncompromising aspect. Let us, therefore in a single verse or two, take their

testimonies ere we pass on. Seven years after the poet's death, standing on the banks of the Nith, near the house where Robert Burns passed away, William Wordsworth wrote thus - at a time (be it remembered) when there were few, especially among those who professed the Christian religion, to speak well of the dead poet: -

*Through busiest street and loneliest glen
Are felt the flashes of his pen;
He rules mild winter snows, and when
Bees fill their hives;
Deep in the general heart of men,
His power survives.*

*Sweet mercy! To the gates of Heaven
This minstrel lead, his sins forgiven;
The rueful conflict, the heart riven
With vain endeavour,
And memory of earth's bitter leaven
Effaced forever.*

(Applause) Nothing truer or more generous has ever been written or spoken of Robert Burns than that, and the poet of the Rotha side and Grasmere Lake, with his solemn horse face and his strait-laced didactic precision, puts to shame many a modern advanced critic, who from the heights of the scorner's chair pats Robert Burns on the head and 'damns him with faint praise.' (Applause) Let us turn to the New Englander. Whittier is not well known among Scotsmen - not so well known as he will one day be. He is one of those 'humbler poets, whose songs gushed from the heart,' whom we read mostly when hand and brain are tired. And for this very reason he will last. He suffered all his life from an uncommon complaint. He was so painfully conscientious that, rather than run the risk of doing what was wrong, he often did nothing at all. This was enough to prevent him from becoming a successful business man in the Sate of wooden nutmegs; and might be supposed to incapacitate the Quaker poet for fully appreciating Burns.

*But what does he say of him?
'O'er rank and pomp, as he had seen
I saw the man uprising
No longer common or unclean,
The child of God's baptising.
With clearer eyes I saw the worth
Of life among the lowly;
The bible at his Cottar's hearth
Had made my own more holy.*

*Let those who never erred forget
His worth in vain bewailings;
Sweet soul of song, I own my debt
Uncancelled by his failings!*

*But think, while falls the shade between
The erring me and heaven,
That he who loved like Magdalen,
Like her may be forgiven.*

*Give lettered pomp to teeth of time,
So 'Bonny Doon' shall tarry;
Blot out the epic's stately line
But spare his "Highland Mary."*

(Applause) It may perhaps help us to understand what Burns has done for Scotland if we try to imagine a Scotland without him. I know it is a difficult, an almost unrealisable thought. We could as soon think of a Scotland without ministers - (laughter)- as a Scotland without Burns. But for once let us imagine it is all a mistake. We are gathered here to celebrate what never happened. Never on any 25th of January was a child born to William Burness in an auld clay biggin' by the Water of Ayr. Never did any 'blast o' Jamuar' win' blaw handsel in on Robin." Let us deal with the case according to the accepted methods of higher criticism. They are well known. They have been applied to many old and venerable beliefs, and have ruthlessly cut away the personalities of many great authors. Homer is not; Ossian is not; and we 'hae oor doots aboot Shakespeare,' (Laughter.) Now if you look at the matter carefully, you will see that Burns is a solar myth. Nothing less! This is the way that it is done. Burns may be translated in the French language Ruisseaux. The word means a number of little streams, signifying the various sources from which the fully-fledged myth arose. The form Ruisseaux is sometimes signed by the so-called Robert Burns; therefore manifestly this is one of those Nature personifications which attach themselves to the youth of every literature. It is a 'Drapeau de Mecontentes' - the standard of revolt against old conventions.

There was also a movement of the same kind in France, which at the time of the French Revolution crystallised itself into a corresponding myth under the name of Jean Jacque Rousseau. It is infinitely improbably, if not wholly impossible, that in two countries at the same time there could dwell two authors of the same revolutionary tendencies, writing under practically the same name. Therefore, neither ever existed. Quod erat demonstrandum. Logic is logic, and we had all better go home. That is the higher literary criticism, and its results are eminently satisfactory. (Laughter) Well, let us provisionally accept these iconoclastic results, and see what we would make of Scotland. There was never any Robert Butns, we shall say. Ayr is swept clean of its memories. Nothing remains but a thriving watering-place, and a large number of respectable burghers and Magistrates. There is no Burns country. Kirk Alloway is but a ruin of harled masonry. No sacred Saturday nights were ever held in the home of William Burness to be inshrined in imperishable verse by his son. Ding the Cottar's Saturday Nicht oot of your minds, for there never was such a thing. Can you do it? NO; I fear me; no more than you can ding doon the 'Carritches' or make the work of John Knox as though it had not been. (Applause.) It were indeed a blank Scotland without Burns - scarce imaginable. NO 'Bonny Jean,' no 'Highland Mary'

no 'Mary Morrison,' no 'Lament for Glencairn' ending with the thrilling words which Burns owed to his early familiarity with Isaiah: -

*The bridegroom may forget the bride,
 Was made his wedded wife yestreen;
 The monarch may forget the crown
 That on his head an hour hath been.
 The mother may forget the child,
 That smiles sae sweetly on her knee;
 But I'll remember thee, Glencairn
 And a' that thou has done for me!*

(Applause.) Of what should our hearts sing when we are glad, if never on blythe forenichts 'Duncan Gray came here to Woo?' What might all the young lasses do if never 'Yestreen a braw wooer cam doon the lang glen?' Can we never listen more to the searching pathos of 'My Nanny's Awa'?' And as for 'Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonny Doon,' are they to be no more to broad Scotland than the banks and braes of the Water of Leith, which only Mr Louis Stevenson has a good word for? (laughter.) Scotland would look the same, I suppose, had there never been a Burns. But not to me, and I think not to you. Afton Water is fair, no doubt, sweet-scented birks set about it; the wimpling burnies running down into it clear as crystal. But what had it been to us if never the lad from the ploughtail had wandered beside it, with his bonnet in his hand, as we see him in Naysmith's picture?

*Sweet fa's the eve on Craigieburn,
 And blythe awakes the morrow;
 But a' the pride o' spring's return
 Can yield me nocht but sorrow.*

And lastly (as we say, professionally), how would we clasp hands and part without the blythesome comradeship of 'Auld Lang Syne' to cheer us on our way? (Applause.) Now that is my sermon. But as I hope that you have all been in the habit of hearing many sermons, you will not expect me to depart so far from immemorial custom as to sit down without a personal application. I trust that you will also like my 'pirlicue.' (Laughter.) I have always thought it wonderful proof of the forgiving nature of Galloway people that we have been willing to overlook the great mistake of Burns' life - which was, his being born in Ayrshire. He ought to have seen to it in time and been born in Galloway - if possible in the parish of Balmaghie. I well remember an old man telling me that when Burns poems came out, many people in Galloway would not read them because it was then held as an article of faith that no good thing could come out of Ayrshire. The prejudice is dying down, I hope - I had almost said, I fear. In old days they used to hang an Ayrshireman when they caught him over the border out of his native Carrick. Now, instead, they let him all the best farms. But Burns did his best to disassociate himself from his early surroundings by coming and living on the borders of Galloway just across the Nith. And it is said - I do not vouch for the truth of it - that whenever he wanted to write any of his finer poems, such as 'Scots Wha Hae'

or anything like that, he came over to Galloway to do it! There is nothing bigoted about Galloway folk, and they allow that Burns was born in Ayrshire. But the misfortune followed him all through his life. He died young! Now what I want to say before I close is that the common people are in danger of forgetting about Burns down there - all throughout the farm towns and villages of the south country - and that for reason easily remediable.

A year or two ago I was in a little bookseller's shop in the south when a rough country chiel came in and in a kind of shamefaced way he asked, 'Hae ye Burns poem about the Moose to sell?' The bookseller had no copy of Burns save a gilt-edged table book of selections at 3s 6d, and this did not suit the pocket of the ploughman. He departed unsatisfied at that time. But the scene told me a tale of a real need. It is a good cheap edition of Burns that is wanted - one carefully edited, liberally printed, and plainly bound, which would sell at sixpence or even a shilling, and so be scattered broadcast over Scotland. Could any work be worthier of the Edinburgh Burns Club? Suppose we celebrate the anniversary of 1895 by issuing such an edition. I am told that the Club languishes a little for lack of a function and a mission. Such an edition of the works of the great poet of Scotland would be a national memorial as worthy as any. (Applause.) Besides, are we so sure that we read him ourselves, or that we all understand him when we do read him? I should greatly admire to have the setting of a paper - a stiff examination paper - to the gentlemen who sit down to this dinner, upon these conditions -50 per cent to be required for a pass - no pass, no dinner! Cribbing and prompting strictly forbidden! (Laughter.) Shall we begin with the chairman? Suppose we put the first question of the Burns Carritches to him - 'Can you translate and explain etymologically the following expression 'A daimen icker in a thrave's a sma' request?' Then we might go on to the vice-chair and see if he was entitled to any dinner, with the test question, 'distinguish carefully the precise meaning of the active verbs in the following verse, and conjugate them fully

'Thou never braindgt, an' fecht, an' fliskit,
But thy auld tail thou wad hae whiskit.
An' spread abreed thy weel-filled brisket,
Wi' pith an' pow'r,
Till spritty knowes wad rain't an' riskit,
An' slypit ower.

(Laughter and Applause.) The members of the Burns club will now be able to gauge their chances of a dinner if they decide to institute such a qualification and appoint me perpetual examiner. I should specially enjoy going over the papers of some of my old University professors; and as they went home dinnerless, they would learn how it felt to be 'spun.' At this season of the year it might have a good effect upon the approaching orals and degree examinations; and the grateful undergraduates would doubtless at the very least erect me a statue opposite that of the late Sir David Brewster, which would be a useful thing at the time of the Rectorial election. They might even appoint me Lord Rector on the strength of my services. Every 'chronic' would work hard for my return, and if I thought there was a chance, I might even stand for a vacant ward in the city, and so become a practical politician - which I am given to understand is the leading qualification for

the office of Lord Rector in the Universities of Scotland (Laughter.) But after our daffin' and our semonising, the toast remains. A very good and complete gospel might be preached from the text, 'A man's a man for a' that!' You have honoured me by asking me to propose 'The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.' I am unworthy of the high honour. But I am proud to serve you, and to say a word for the 'marvellous ploughman.' We know his faults. They were never hidden. For and against him all has been said. Worst and best, concerning Burns there is no new thing to say. But after all the man remains. Definitely, he was a man. 'For a' that an' a' that, Robin's a man for a' that!' And just because he is a man he touches our hearts, and draws us together in the brotherhood of comrades and the kinship of the race. I propose to you, gentlemen, without on word more, 'The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.'

The Chairman, in proposing the health of the Rev Mr Crockett, said Mr Crockett's interesting and instructive speech must have given intense satisfaction to every one present. (Applause.) The beauty and Scottishness of the language, his just yet generous and sympathetic analysis and estimate of the life shown by him, as well as the true appreciation of his works shown by him, must have made every one feel better acquainted with Robert Burns, and more than ever an admirer of his genius. (Applause.) It had been the custom of some people to characterise such meetings as theirs as orgies, where with the aid of whisky they celebrate the failings of the man. No one could say so with truth of such meetings as theirs and of such Burns clubs as theirs. (Hear, hear.) But perhaps the best way to give such calumnies the lie was on all occasions to secure the presence and co-operation of men of the stamp and character of the Rev Mr Crockett (Applause.) That club had always been fortunate in embracing within its membership eminent divines. On more than one occasion they had had the toast of the evening proposed by eminent clergymen; and, for some strange reason or another, up till this time the clergymen had all belonged to the Church of Scotland. He hoped no one would think that an additional reason for Disestablishment. (Laughter) but the record had been broken. They now welcomed among them an honoured and respected clergyman of the Free Church of Scotland - a church of which Scotland might well be proud. Mr Crockett was not only a respected and honoured minister of his Church, but he had earned for himself fresh laurels in the paths of literature. He had done nothing more decisive than to prove that he himself was neither a 'stickit minister' nor a 'common man.' (Loud applause, followed by the singing of 'For He's a jolly good fellow.'

The Rev Mr Crockett thanked the company for their generous kindness, and said that if ten years hence they asked him to perform the same duty again, he hoped that by that time he would have done something which would make their kindness less overwhelming than it had been on that occasion. (Applause.)

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