

Commencement Thesis.

The Life and Work of Robert Barrus.
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Any one visiting the many wild and picturesque scenes of Scotland, would excite expressions of surprise and consternation, should he refuse to visit the birthplace of Scotland's songster, Robert Burns. Many travelers have turned aside that they might look for a few moments on the place so sacred to the Scottish people, and have given us, by the aid of their pens, a glimpse of what they saw and felt.

The house built of clay in which Robert Burns was born still stands on the bank of the River Alloway not far from the town of Ayr. More than a hundred years have passed since that cold stormy January day which saw the birth of nature's truest poet. Humble surroundings marked his birth and life's career. Poverty confronted him all his days but he never forgot the more needy.

He was the eldest of seven children and was obliged at an early age to do considerable heavy work. Both he and his brother Gilbert, did men's work before they had reached the years of manhood. At the time of Robert's birth we are told his father had rented a piece of ground and attempted to grow a nursery but he was not successful and in 1766 the family moved to Mount Cliphart, only to renew the old struggle. But they seem never to have lost hope. William

Burns was a strong man in the best sense of the word, and his wife was a good and intelligent woman. His father's character, Robert has given to the world in his "Cottar's Saturday Night." Burns was seven years old at the time of their removal to Mount Cliphart, and eighteen years when they went to Lochley. Thus we find the formative period of his life spent here and it may be well to notice what influences entered into and became a part of his character.

Both of his parents were God-fearing people and sought to bring their children into a view of perfect life. All through their struggle with poverty the minds and souls of their little ones were adorned, always with a helping leading hand rather than a driving one. Robert's mother had a large supply of songs and legends of which she gave liberally to him and his brothers and sisters. His earliest book was one of hymns which he carried with him to the field and read as he followed the plow. It is said the family were often found seated at the table each holding a spoon in one hand and a book in the other and one writer tells the books they read were the best Scotland possessed.

Burns tells us of an old woman who resided

with the family for some time. She had an unusual supply of legends and songs. Her stories were of witches and ghosts that the superstitious people of that time believed in. He says their influence was so great as to stay with him for years, sometimes making an effort of philosophy necessary to shake off the idle terrors.

No school was handy at this place but education was too highly prized by the family to be neglected. Four of the neighbors together hired a Mr. Murdoch to teach their children. He has left interesting accounts of this family. The fact that he felt Gilbert Burns was more likely to be a man of acron than his brother Robert, has often been spoken of, and now we hesitate to laugh at one who is dull of comprehension, lest he become a Burns or a Daniel Webster and our laughter returned to consternation.

In addition to what the teacher gave them in training, Robert's father taught him writing and arithmetic. Thus we find in his early life a strong pure home influence with as good a training as circumstances would allow. We know too that he possessed an unusually strong pure love of creation. The books he carried to field he himself tells us he studied with a critical

eye, gleaming out what seemed to be of the finest strain. This gave him another stronghold for his future career.

Out side of his home, music was still the main influence. All Scotland sang: the milk maid, the ploughman, old and young, men and women sang like birds all day. Neighbors gathered about the hearth of one of their number and joined in the songs of Scotland they all loved. A custom which might still be more generally pursued, with profit.

Even the natural objects about him inspired noble thoughts and deeds. Scotland has many rugged picturesque bits of landscape as well as a beautiful supply of peaceful vales, musical with the ripple and murmur of the streams flowing through them. She had, too, many places dear to the heart of Scots for remembrance of deeds of valor. Many of these places had never been sung of by the poets. Burns saw this and wondered at it, and said later in life:

"O'er them a wish, & o'er its power,
 A wish that to my latest hour
 Shall strongly bear my trust,
 That & for your Auld Scotland's sake
 Some useful plan or book could make

Or sing a song at least."

How much of that wish remained with him and of the songs he sang we shall see.

During this period there came into his life two new things but coming as one. Here he first loved a "sweet, bonnie, sossie lass" and to her he addressed his first poem. From what he said of it we know he had no thought at the time of becoming a poet.

His manner is described by Mr. Murdoch as very quiet, thoughtful. Gilbert tells us Robert was the center of fire on days when the two boys together with other boys went to gather peat for winter fuel.

No success rewarded their efforts at this farm and in 1877 they removed to Lockley where they remained until Robert's twenty fifth year. The extreme poverty of the family had prevented the young people from seeing high society. The people with whom they associated were probably their inferiors intellectually, and Robert could not yet be received among his equals.

After their removal to Lockley he occasionally went away from home evenings to spend a few hours with the other young people and as he said, "Give his manners a brush."

After this he went to Kirkoswald to study but evidently did not do much. Thinking to increase the profit of flax raising by learning the trade of dressing flax, Burns went to Irvine to learn the craft in 1751. but met with only misfortune and returned to find that his father had given up his struggle with debt and failure to wait calmly for death. Late in the year 1753 the family moved to Mossgiel under the guidance of Robert and Gilbert, and early in the following year their father died. It was only by the closest application they managed to stay here. Stamps says this period of his life proved three things concerning him: his failure as a farmer, his chance of success as a poet and his frailty as a man.

In 1774 the first volume of his poems was printed. His purpose in putting them out was that he might raise money to pay his passage to India in order to escape the vengeance of Mr. Arden. As he was just about to embark, a change in his plans was made by his receiving from a friend in Edinburgh an invitation to come there and meet some of the people who had expressed such great pleasure in reading his poems. When he first reached Edinburgh he

he shared the room and fare of a poor man whom he had known before coming here. He was not allowed to stay here long after some of his more influential friends found him.

It is hard to understand how a man who has seen very little - we may almost say nothing of society, could enter the circle of Scotland's best men and women and hold the earnest attention of those who had been for years in society and knew all its fads. One foil which Burns seems never to have learned to throw is that of "Polite fibs". What he said was true and was spoken from a heart that felt its truth.

It is pleasant to picture to our mind this man of the country, rugged in appearance, dignified in act and speech, without the least affectation, entering the houses and dining with the people who had the best their country could give in any way. It is pleasant to think one who had lived so hard a life who had fought so many difficulties had still the strength of character to feel his own worth and respect himself in the presence of those whom the world recognized as great. But even the attentions he received from these lords and ladies could not make him forget his old associates with more

than a momentary forgetfulness. It was so all through his life. We repeatedly find him giving his best to entertain worthy men and when they are gone turning to his coarser nature for the amusement of men who never did better.

This was a keen and many sided man for he understood men so well. He could sympathize with those who suffered for he knew what suffering was: he could respect men of noble character for his father had early taught him what true nobility meant; and from this same lesson of life he could despise the mean and low and did even when his weak will let him leave the path he knew to be right.

His friendship for most women was a warmer passion. But to Mrs. Hemlock he has shown the best and truest side of his nature.

In 1775 his second volume of poems appeared and when he succeeded in getting a part of his money from his publisher, Creech, he traveled in the northern part of Scotland. These tours held great interest for it was not the fashion at that time to travel for pleasure. A few English poets had done so but it was not yet a regular thing for a poet to visit the spot he wished to make

memorable in verse and gain his inspiration from sight and feeling. Burns had always dreamed of these places in Scotland only a few of which were known in popular song, and hoped to gather material while on these trips for Johnson's Museum, a collection of the best and purest songs of Scotland. Only a few poems resulted directly. The most he gave from these tours was written later and suggested by other scenes. Burns visited many of those places which in his boyhood were so full of meaning to him for their connection with the noblest virtues of the Scots.

We can easily realize the reason for the inferior quality of the few poems written at this time when we remember that his companions were not of the same turn of mind as himself. When Wordsworth traveled over nearly the same part of the country, he had with him a sister who saw nature much the same as he did and, too, these people went about taking time to let the scenes through which they passed gain a stronghold on their minds and imaginations. Burns traveled on horse back or in a post chaise and did not tarry long with nature. Now that his mind was not at ease. While in

Edinburgh he had kept bad company and as was natural to one with so high a sense of moral rightness the knowledge of his shortcomings filled him with remorse. Another thing which must have had great weight was his dropping the old Scotch dialect which he had given so purely in his song, for the English speech. Many of his literary friends advised him to do so but it did not prove to be wise for he did not know the English so well and more than this, the Scotch dialect was rich in expression, and as one had succeeded so well as Burns in putting it in verse. Scottish scenery could not be described so well in English as in the native tongue.

The people Burns met while on these tours hold their own peculiar interest. Wherever he went and at whatever time, he was cordially welcomed. The meeting which holds perhaps more interest than any other of these was that of Robert Burns and Neil Gow - the composer of Scotch song, the one of words the other of music. It is a noticeable fact that the man who told so much of Scotland never saw the stream, Yarrow, of which all poets sang.

In October 1787 he returned to Edinburgh

hoping to get the rest of the money due him from Creech. He remained here until March 1855 and in the spring of this year married Jean Armour. When a settlement was made with his publisher he bought the Ellistand farm which a neighbor told him was "none of a poet's than a farmer's choice". This proved only too true for the beauty of the location could not make up for the poor soil and in spite of grim determination, droughts and other things drove success away and to keep his wife and little ones from starvation he took up a work he more than despised, that of a cise-mass. He continued in this office until the time of his death. In this work he has shown his kindly sympathetic heart toward the struggles of the poor by helping them out of wrong doing instead of bringing the law down about them as so many would have done.

By his thirtieth year Burns began to feel the effects of his early intemperance and wrote to some of his friends of his growing feeling of age. All that could be done for him was given faith full trial but he failed constantly for five years and died a physical

wreck. As is so often the case, men did not give Burns all the praise he deserved until after his death and we have not ceased yet to find new praiseworthy in what he has done.

Up to almost his last hour Burns wrote of Scotland and took great pleasure in the work. Many of his home songs of Scotland are sung in many nations. His work could not but be felt coming as Carlyle said "on an age the most prosaic Scotland had yet known" and he has gained rather than lost popular love. As the years go by, much that was not good in his life and work will be forgotten and the pure simple need of his life as in "The Cottar's Saturday Night", the sweet songs, "Flow Gently Sweet Afton" "Auld Lang Syne" and "Coming through the Rye" will be remembered and loved while man shall live.