

**ROBERT BURNS. TWO ADDRESSES
DELIVERED AT DUMFRIES AND
GLASGOW ON THE CENTENARY
OF THE POET'S DEATH, 21ST JULY
1896**

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Robert Burns. Two addresses delivered at Dumfries and Glasgow on the centenary of the poet's death, 21st July 1896 by Archibald Philip Primrose Rosebery

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and Glasgow on the Centenary
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BY

LORD ROSEBERRY

SECOND EDITION

EDINBURGH

DAVID DOUGLAS, 10 CASTLE STREET

1896

On the morning of the 21st of July LORD ROSEBERRY received at the poet's tomb wreaths brought by deputations from all parts of the world. At two o'clock he delivered the following Address in the DRILL HALL at DUMFRIES.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I come here as a loyal burghess of Dumfries to do honour to the greatest burghess of Dumfries. You, Mr. Provost, have laid upon me a great distinction but a great burden. Your most illustrious burghess obtained privileges for his children in respect of his burghess-ship, but you impose on your youngest burghess an honour that might well break anybody's back—that of attempting to do justice in any shape or fashion to the hero of to-day's ceremony. But we citizens of Dumfries have a special claim to be considered on this day. We are surrounded by the choicest and the most sacred haunts of the poet. You have in this town the house in which he died, the "Globe" where we could have wished that some phonograph had then existed which could have communicated to us some of his wise and witty and wayward talk. You have the street commemorated in M'Culloch's tragic anecdote when Burns was shunned by his

former friends, and you have the paths by the Nith which are associated with some of his greatest work. You have near you the room in which the whistle was contended for, and in which, if mere legend is to be trusted, the immortal Dr. Gregory was summoned to administer his first powders to the survivors of that memorable debauch. You have the stackyard in which, lying on his back and contemplating—

"Thou lingering star, with lessening ray,
That lov'st to greet the early morn,"

he wrote the lines to "Mary in Heaven"—perhaps the most pathetic of his poems. You have near you the walk by the river, where, in his transport, he passed his wife and children without seeing them, "his brow flushed and his eyes shining" with the lustre of "Tam o' Shanter." "I wish you had but seen him," said his wife; "he was in such ecstasy that the tears were happing down his cheeks." That is why we are in Dumfries to-day. We come to honour Burns among these immortal haunts of his.

But it is not in Dumfries alone that he is commemorated to-day; for all Scotland will pay her tribute. And this, surely, is but right. Mankind owes him a general debt. But the debt of Scotland is special. For Burns exalted our race, he hallowed Scotland and the Scottish tongue. Before his time we had for a long period been scarcely recognised, we had been

falling out of the recollection of the world. From the time of the union of the Crowns, and still more from the time of the legislative union, Scotland had lapsed into obscurity. Except for an occasional riot or a Jacobite rising, her existence was almost forgotten. She had, indeed, her Robertsons and her Humes writing history to general admiration, but no trace of Scottish authorship was discoverable in their works; indeed, every flavour of national idiom was carefully excluded. The Scottish dialect, as Burns called it, was in danger of perishing. Burns seemed at this juncture to start to his feet and re-assert Scotland's claim to national existence; his Scottish notes rang through the world, and he thus preserved the Scottish language for ever; for mankind will never allow to die that idiom in which his songs and poems are enshrined. That is a part of Scotland's debt to Burns.

But this is much more than a Scottish demonstration; it is a collection of representatives from all quarters of the globe to own a common allegiance and a common faith. It is not only Scotsmen honouring the greatest of Scotsmen—we stretch far beyond a kingdom or a race—we are rather a sort of poetical Mohammedans gathered at a sort of poetical Mecca.

And yet we are assembled in our high enthusiasm under circumstances which are somewhat paradoxical. For with all the appearance

of joy, we celebrate not a festival, but a tragedy. It is not the sunrise but the sunset that we commemorate. It is not the birth of a new power into the world, the subtle germ of a fame that is to survive and inspire the generations of men ; but it is perhaps more fitting that we celebrate the end and not the beginning. For the coming of these figures is silent ; it is their disappearance that we know. At this instant that I speak there may be born into the world the equal of a Newton or a Cæsar, but half of us would be dead before he had revealed himself. Their death is different. It may be gloomy and disastrous ; it may come at a moment of shame or neglect ; but by that time the man has carved his name somewhere on the Temple of Fame. There are exceptions, of course ; cases where the end comes before the slightest, or any but the slightest, recognition—Chatterton choking in his garret, hunger of body and soul all unsatisfied ; Millet selling his pictures for a song ; nay, Shakespeare himself. But, as a rule, death in the case of genius closes the first act of a public drama ; criticism and analysis may then begin their unbiassed work free from jealousy or friendship or personal consideration for the living. Then comes the third act, if third act there be.

No, it is a death, not a birth, that we celebrate. This day a century ago, in poverty, delirium, and distress, there was passing the soul

of Robert Burns. To him death comes in clouds and darkness, the end of a long agony of body and soul; he is harassed with debt, his bodily constitution is ruined, his spirit is broken, his wife is daily expecting her confinement. He has lost almost all that rendered his life happy—much of friendship, credit, and esteem. Some score years before, one of the most charming of English writers, as he lay dying, was asked if his mind was at ease, and with his last breath Oliver Goldsmith owned that it was not. So it was with Robert Burns. His delirium dwelt on the horrors of a jail; he uttered curses on the tradesman who was pursuing him for debt. "What business," said he to his physician in a moment of consciousness, "what business has a physician to waste his time upon me; I am a poor pigeon not worth plucking. Alas! I have not feathers enough to carry me to my grave." For a year or more his health had been failing. He had a poet's body as well as a poet's mind; nervous, feverish, impressionable; and his constitution, which, if nursed and regulated, might have carried him to the limit of life, was unequal to the storm and stress of dissipation and a preying mind. In the previous autumn he had been seized with a rheumatic attack; his digestion had given way; he was sunk in melancholy and gloom. In his last April he wrote to his friend Thomson, "By Babel's streams I've sate and

wept almost ever since I saw you last ; I have only known existence by the pressure of the heavy hand of sickness, and have counted time by the repercussions of pain. Rheumatism, cold, and fever have formed to me a terrible combination. I close my eyes in misery, and open them without hope." It was sought to revive him by sea bathing, and he went to stay at Brow-well. There he remained three weeks, but was under no delusion as to his state. "Well, madam," he said to Mrs. Riddell on arriving, "have you any commands for the other world?" He sat that evening with his old friend, and spoke manfully of his approaching death, of the fate of his children, and his fame ; sometimes indulging in bitter-sweet pleasantries, but never losing the consciousness of his condition. In three weeks he wearied of the fruitless hunt for health, and he returned home to die. He was only just in time. When he re-entered his home on the 18th he could no longer stand ; he was soon delirious ; in three days he was dead. "On the fourth day," we are told, "when his attendant held a cordial to his lips, he swallowed it eagerly, rose almost wholly up, spread out his hands, sprang forward nigh the whole length of the bed, fell on his face, and expired."

I suppose there are many who can read the account of these last months with composure. They are more fortunate than I. There is