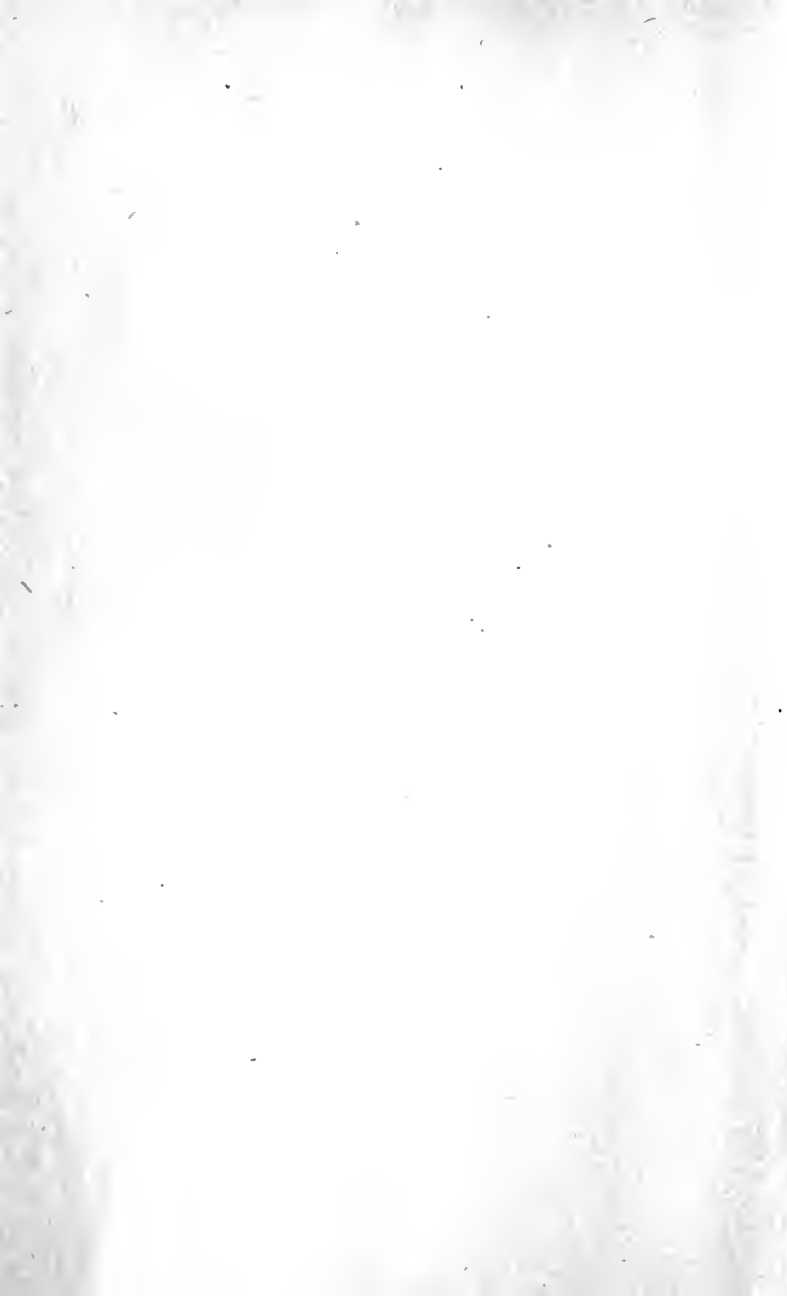


BURNS

From a New Point of View







BURNS
FROM A NEW POINT
OF VIEW



8967
Oct. 13

BURNS

FROM A NEW POINT
OF VIEW

BY

SIR JAMES CRICHTON-BROWNE

217323
17. 11. 27

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

PR
Y331
C74

Made and Printed in Great Britain
T. and A. CONSTABLE LTD., Printers, Edinburgh

TO MY FRIEND
SIR ROBERT BRUCE
PRESIDENT OF THE BURNS FEDERATION
AND
PROVOCATEUR OF THIS LITTLE BOOK
IT IS VERY CORDIALLY INSCRIBED



PREFATORY NOTE

THE *Glasgow Herald* has given hospitality to a series of articles on 'Burns from a New Point of View,' and a demand has arisen—as its columns testify—for the reproduction of these in a readily accessible and handy form. They are here thus presented. They do not aim at the canonisation of Burns, but it is hoped that they may brush away some of the mildew that has so long tarnished the fair fame of Scotland's greatest son.



BURNS

FROM A NEW POINT OF VIEW

TEN miles south-east of Dumfries, on the Solway shore, stands the meanest, shabbiest little spa in all the world. It consists of three white-washed cottages; a tank the size of a dining-table and lined with red-stone, into which, through an iron pipe, the mineral water trickles; an esplanade a score of yards long, of coarse tufted grass; and the pump-room, a dilapidated wooden shed, the walls and benches of which are graven over and over again with the initials of those who have sought healing at the Well. The country immediately around is flat and uninteresting. Inland there are a few stunted plantations of gnarled oaks and shaggy Scotch firs, which by their bent backs bear witness to the rough usage of the western winds, while in front there is a broad, flat, hillocky expanse, studded with bent grass and furze, and ending in the sea-beach, consisting of a mixture of sand and clay known

locally as *sleetch*. This uninviting substance extends for several miles into the Solway Firth, with so slight a declination that the tide at low water recedes entirely out of sight and leaves to the eye a barren and cheerless waste.

On a dull day, with the skies draped in cloud and at low water, a more forlorn and desolate place than the Brow-Well—for that is how this spa is named, no one knows how or why—it would be difficult to imagine; but when the sun shines and the skies clear and the tide is in, it becomes a fascinating spot, for a magnificent panorama is disclosed to view. On the horizon on the east stretches the long range of the Cumberland and Westmorland mountains, Skiddaw, Saddleback, Helvellyn, and the rest of them in an outline of fantastic beauty, and ending in the ‘sapphire promontory which men name St. Bees’; to the south ‘huge Criffel’s hoary top ascends’; to the west, tier on tier, run the rugged Galloway hills, and then the ample woodlands that surround Comlongan Castle, while in the foreground sparkle the last ripples of the Atlantic flow.

But whatever its physical features may be, the Brow-Well must be regarded as a sacred pre-

cinct by all Scotsmen, for it was the scene of the last act of a memorable and deeply moving Scottish tragedy. It was the Gethsemane of Robert Burns. It was there that 'exceeding sorrowful even unto death' he spent the last fortnight of his glorious but troubled life.

Before Burns went to the Brow-Well by the advice of Dr. Maxwell, on July 4, 1796, he knew that his days were numbered. 'He was too dejected in spirits,' says Currie, 'and too well aware of his real situation to entertain hopes of recovery.' On June 26, writing to Mr. James Clarke of Forfar, he said: 'Were you to see the emaciated figure who now holds the pen to you, you would not know your old friend. Whether I shall ever get about again is only known to Him, the Great Unknown, whose creature I am. Alas, Clarke! I begin to fear the worst.' On the morning of his journey to the Brow-Well, he wrote to Mr. James Johnson: 'This protracting, slow, consuming illness will, I doubt much, my dear friend, arrest my sun before he has well reached his middle career,' and immediately on his arrival there, to Mr. George Thomson: 'Besides my inveterate rheumatism my appetite is quite gone, and I am so emaciated

as to be scarcely able to support myself on my own legs.' Two days later he wrote to Mr. Alexander Cunningham : ' Alas ! my friend, I fear the voice of the bard will soon be heard among you no more.' But his courage was indomitable, and he was willing to try any treatment that held out even a frail hope of prolonging his days for a little, not on his own account so much, for ambition and passion were dead within him, as for the sake of his wife and children, ever wrapt in his warm affection, who would, he feared with a poignant fear, be left destitute on his death. Considering his condition at this time, his miserable circumstances, lodged in a thatched cottage with only a but and a ben, partaking of nothing but porridge and milk, one contemplates with wonder and admiration the heroism he displayed, his patience and resolution in these last dark days. His bodily sufferings must have been severe, his mental throes excruciating.

There were pathetic incidents during Burns' sojourn at the Brow-Well. Mrs. Riddel, that brilliant and gifted woman to whom he had become fully reconciled after their temporary estrangement, and whose posthumous apprecia-

tion of him is one of the finest tributes to his memory, was residing for the benefit of her health in the neighbourhood, and hearing of his arrival sent her carriage for him, as he was unable to walk. The interview was affecting. 'Well, madam, have you any commands for the other world?' was his salutation on entering the room, and Mrs. Riddel at once saw that the stamp of death was impressed on his features. 'He seemed already touching the brink of eternity. He spoke of his death,' she says, 'without any of the ostentation of philosophy, but with firmness as well as feeling, as an event likely to happen very soon, and which gave him concern chiefly from leaving his four children so young and unprotected, and his wife in so interesting a situation, in hourly expectation of lying-in with a fifth. . . . I have seldom seen his mind greater or more collected. There was frequently a considerable degree of vivacity in his sallies. We parted about sunset. The next day, July 6, I saw him again, and we parted to meet no more.'

A few evenings later Burns was bidden to tea at the Ruthwell Manse, distant about a quarter of a mile from the Brow-Well, and no doubt

crawled there by the path through the fields, between hedgerows then decked with hawthorn and honeysuckle, his favourite flowers. His altered appearance excited much silent sympathy, and the evening being beautiful and the sun shining brightly through the casement, Miss Craig (afterwards Mrs. Henry Duncan) was afraid the light might be too much for him, and rose with the view of letting down the window blinds. Burns guessed what she meant, and regarding the young lady with a look of great benignity, said, 'Thank you, my dear, for your kind attention, but oh ! let him shine ! he will not shine long for me.'

But it is from his letters, written from the Brow-Well, that we can best realise the pangs that rent his breast at that time. Prostrate as he was, he wrote to Thomson that he was still willing to go on with his work of song-making, as he would not wish to see another employed on it. To Alexander Cunningham he wrote in dread that his salary as an exciseman would be reduced to £35 from £50 during his illness, and begging him to use his interest to prevent such a ruinous deduction. To his brother Gilbert he wrote : ' God keep my wife and children ! If I am

taken from their head they will be poor indeed. I have contracted one or two serious debts, partly from my illness these many months, partly from too much thoughtlessness as to expense when I came to town, that will cut in too much on the little I leave them in your hands.' To his cousin, James Burness of Montrose, he wrote: 'A rascal of a haberdasher, to whom I owe a considerable bill, taking it into his head that I am dying, has commenced a process against me, and will infallibly put my emaciated body into jail. Will you be so good as to accommodate me, and that by return of post, with ten pounds? Oh, James! did you know the pride of my heart, you would feel doubly for me. Alas! I am not used to beg. . . . Forgive me for once more mentioning by return of post—save me from the horrors of a jail.' To Thomson he wrote in the same strain asking for a loan of five pounds and engaging to furnish him in return with five pounds' worth of 'the neatest song-genius you have seen.' To Mr. John Clark, a farmer at Locherwoods near the Brow, he wrote: 'As the tides are over, I anxiously wish to return to town. Dare I be so bold as to borrow your gig?' To his wife he wrote:

‘ My dearest love, I delayed writing until I could tell you what effect sea-bathing was like to produce. It would be injustice to deny that it has eased my pains and I think has strengthened me, but my appetite is still extremely bad. No flesh nor fish can I swallow ; porridge and milk is the only thing I taste. I am very happy to hear by Miss Jessie Lewars that you are all well. My best and kindest compliments to her and to all the children. I will see you on Sunday. Your affectionate husband.’ To his father-in-law, Mr. James Armour, he wrote, on the day of his return home from the Brow-Well, in an interval of delirious wandering: ‘ Do, for Heaven’s sake, send Mrs. Armour here immediately. My wife is hourly expecting to be put to bed. Good God ! what a situation for her to be in, poor girl, without a friend. I returned from sea-bathing quarters to-day, and my medical friends would almost persuade me that I am better, but I think and feel that my strength is so gone that the disorder will prove fatal to me.’ Callous must be the man who could read these letters without a rising in his throat. The pity, the shame of it, to think of this sublime, glorious genius, the kindest-hearted poet that

ever lived, stricken with mortal disease in his prime, and still, say what they may, in full possession of his choice gifts, to think of him at that supreme hour harassed by sordid cares and haunted by ghastly apprehensions ! Burns read his Bible daily while at the Brow-Well, and no doubt prayed fervently that if it were possible the cup might pass from him. But that was not to be.

In Burns' last letter to his wife he tries to cheer her in her hour of trial by telling her that his pains are less and that he has gained strength, and he seems really to have believed that his visit to the Brow-Well, with the waters, fresh air, and sea-bathing, had done him good, but that was the fond illusion of a dying man. He got steadily worse while he was there, had a sharp feverish attack before he left it, and returned home from it on July 18, and died on July 21.

Why was Burns sent to the Brow-Well ? Looking back from the medical point of view on the meagre reports of his state of health which have come down to us, it seems clear that his regimen there was the worst possible under the circumstances and hastened his end. Dr. Maxwell no doubt acted for the best, but he took, as

I shall hope to show, an entirely erroneous view of Burns' case, and thinking, as Burns says he did, that melancholy and low spirits were half his disease, he suggested change of scene, the drinking of water which was regarded as tonic, and the bracing effects of sea-bathing.

The Brow-Well had long had a reputation in the south of Scotland as beneficial and curative in a variety of complaints, and, although not in such vogue as it used to be, still in some measure retains that reputation. In Burns' time, and long afterwards, although the accommodation was wretched—there were in those days half-a-dozen small cottages forming a *clachan*—it was always full of visitors in the summer months, and pilgrims came daily to drink the water, of which the approved dose was eight or ten tumblerfuls *per diem*, and, like pilgrims to Lourdes, to carry away with them some of it in bottles and greybeards. No one seems to have had any idea of the constitution of the water except that it was ferruginous, and no definite notions existed as to the kinds of illnesses in which it was beneficial. The popular idea was that in disorders of the stomach, liver, and kidneys it worked wonders, but sufferers

from consumption, scrofula, cancer, and many other maladies tested its virtues, and no doubt often found them salutary. The Dumfries doctors recommended it in nervous complaints, and so hysterical women and hypochondriacal men, as in the case of more pretentious spas, sometimes created an exaggerated estimate of its merits.

Interested in the water of the Brow-Well because Burns in his dire extremity partook of it, I have had it analysed, I believe for the first time, and with the following results :

	Pts. per 100'000
Iron (as ferric oxide F_2O_3) . . .	7·6
Sodium chloride (NaCl) . . .	3·6
Magnesium sulphate ($Mg.SO_4$) . . .	13·5
Sodium sulphate (M_2SO_4) . . .	8·2
Calcium carbonate ($CaCO_3$) . . .	11·7
Nitrates	}
Phosphates	
Undetermined	
	<u>51·9</u>

It would thus appear that the water must be regarded as that of a mild chalybeate spring, not, however, containing bicarbonate of iron in the gaseous state as in the springs of Spa in Belgium.

The iron is in solution in the Brow-Well, probably in the form of sulphate as in the iron sulphate waters of Vicar's Bridge near Dollar and Hartfell Spa near Moffat. The action of the water would be due, assuredly, to the iron it contains, and the correct practice would be to drink of it an hour before meals.

That Burns drank the waters of the Brow-Well is undoubted, but in going there he had in view the restorative influence of country quarters and, incredible as it may seem, considering his condition, of sea-bathing and of exercise on horseback. Dr. Maxwell long afterwards represented to Dr. Currie that Burns was impatient of medical restraint, and determined himself to try the effects of sea-bathing; but Burns expressly says 'the medical people order me, *as I value my existence*, to fly to sea-bathing and country quarters.' So this broken-down man, who had seldom left his house for months and had spent most of his time in bed, who could scarcely stand upon his legs and bore on his countenance the pale cast of death, was sent to bathe in the open sea of the Solway, where bathing is, at its best, only possible for two weeks in the month, owing to the state of the tides,

and even then after much wading to obtain any depth of water. He was also to bestride and jolt about on a Rosinante.

The country quarters and fresh air were certainly advisable for Burns, for they secured his removal for a time in hot July weather from the small house in the Mill Vennel, enveloped in the effluvia of an adjacent tannery, where were an ailing wife and four young children; and he had during his stay at the Brow-Well some restful hours reclining on the Merse, where, curiously enough, just forty-five years afterwards, his great and wise expositor also sought repose. In 1841 Carlyle and his wife spent a month's holiday in a cottage on the Solway shore not far from the Brow-Well. 'It is long,' Carlyle wrote, 'since I have had so interesting a dialogue with any of my fellow creatures as with this waste, sandy, ever-flowing flood of the Solway. As my friends the gulls and sand-larks, not to say the net-fishers, and the two and thirty winds of heaven, bring cloudfields and savage wind-music, Cockneydom shrinks into the size of a worm-eaten walnut.' Perhaps with Burns, communing with nature there, all the slanders and contumelies of Dumfries died

away and were forgotten for a little in the hum of the bee.

But his cure at the Brow-Well, in as far as its other elements were concerned, and especially as regards the sea-bathing, in which he valiantly persevered, persuading himself that he was being strengthened thereby, cannot but have been hurtful to him. The marvel is that he survived to return to his home. This he did on the evening of Monday of July 18, when his poor wife was so struck by the change in his appearance that she became speechless. From this period he was closely confined to his bed, and was scarcely himself for half-an-hour at a time. 'He was aware of his infirmity,' said Mrs. Burns, 'and asked me to touch him and remind him when he went wrong !'

Of what did Burns die ? Hitherto there has been but one answer to that question. However evasive, veiled, or euphemised, that answer has been, of drink. That is, baldly stated, the conclusion at which his biographers have one and all, more or less reluctantly, arrived. It has been all but universally accepted that, having been intemperate from time to time throughout his life, Burns ultimately gave way to excesses which

undermined his constitution and cut short his career. He has been likened to Edgar Allan Poe. 'Drink and debauchery,' says Robert Louis Stevenson, 'helped to destroy his constitution and were the means of his unconscious suicide.' 'Damaged by drink,' is how Henley interprets Syme's phrase, 'burnt to a cinder.' 'Had he died in 1794,' said Lord Rosebery in his fine requiem, 'it might have been happier for himself, and we should have lost some part of his life which we would rather forget.' 'The untimely death of Burns,' said Lockhart, 'was, it is too probable, hastened by his own intemperances and imprudences. The indictment is proven.' 'Drank hard in Dumfries,' remarks his fellow rhymester, Alexander Smith. 'He faltered,' exclaimed Wordsworth, 'drifted to and fro and passed away.' Shairp deploras his 'excessive drinking bouts in Dumfries,' and Carlyle, loftiest of them all, concludes 'his faults, the faults of others, proved too much for him, and that spirit which might have soared could it but have walked, soon sank in the dust, its glorious faculties trodden underfoot in the blossom.' The objurgations addressed to Burns when he occupied the stool of repentance were

brief and perfunctory compared with those continuously hurled at him since he was raised to the niche of fame.

It is his early biographers who are responsible for this fable, for fable I believe it to be. Heron, a licentiate of the kirk, who wrote the first *Life*, a man of severely clerical habits of thought and censorious tendencies, with small warrant started it, but his feeble effort could not have carried it far, and it was Currie, the strong, upright, learned man, who gave it the impetus that has kept it rolling on ever since. He has been the arch-calumniator, and has tainted the pages of all who have written about Burns since his time. Carlyle, in his magnificent *Burns' Oratorio*, thought that repeated attempts at a *Biography of Burns* would give us repeated approximations to a true portrait of the man; but that anticipation has not been fulfilled, for notwithstanding at least twenty such attempts and immeasurable talk, the popular conception of Burns' character stands to-day pretty much where Currie placed it. Even Scotsmen, to whom alone Leslie Stephen's said criticism of Burns is allowed, cannot altogether get away from Currie's circumstantial account; while

beyond the Border the prevailing belief is everywhere that Burns was a man of the highest genius who wrote exquisite songs and drank himself to death.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Currie, for, but for him, we might have had no even inadequate biography of Burns. He was unwilling to undertake the task, and only agreed to do so when all others who were eligible for it had declined. He was eminently painstaking and laborious in his execution of the work, collecting much valuable material which would otherwise have been irretrievably lost, and which has proved the staple, manipulated in various ways, of all subsequent biographers. His style was dignified and scholarly, and he has given us many delightful glimpses of the poet, whose genius he warmly admired and whose compositions he for the most part justly appraised. He was mainly instrumental, it is not to be forgotten, in making some provision for Burns' widow and orphan children. He meant to deal faithfully and even gently with the Bard. 'In relating the incidents of his life,' he said, 'candour will prevent us from dwelling invidiously on those faults and failings which justice forbids us to

conceal ; we will tread lightly over his yet warm ashes, and respect the laurels that shelter his untimely grave.'

But Currie was antipathetic to Burns ; he had strong prejudices, and was to some extent misinformed. Carlyle said truly of Currie that he introduced Burns with a certain patronising air as if ' the public might think it strange and unwarrantable that a man of science, a scholar and a gentleman, should do such honour to a rustic.' But Currie not merely patronised Burns, he sermonised him and moralised over him. He was a son of the manse, reared in rigid Presbyterianism, and although he had travelled and seen the world, and been in practice as a physician in Liverpool for seventeen years, he retained to the last those Calvinistic prepossessions with which he has himself affirmed the Scottish ' nation is so deeply affected.' He had therefore little tolerance for Burns' latitudinarian doctrines ; but more than that, he was deeply pained by his irregularities of conduct and freedom of speech, and pronounced some of his humorous pieces which have delighted the millions ' unfit to see the light,' although he had not then perused ' The

Jolly Beggars.' But Currie had, we may say, a special disqualification for dealing impartially with Burns' conduct, because he was an ardent temperance advocate, and therefore opposed to convivial indulgences of all kinds, and prone to trace to alcohol all the ills that flesh is heir to. He was indeed somewhat fanatical on the subject. He owed his scientific reputation to a treatise on 'Cold and Hot Water in the Treatment of Fevers.' He was a pioneer in this country of hydrotherapy, as it is now called, or the cold water cure, and was never tired of denouncing in good set terms the rapidly increasing use of spirituous liquors—'A detestable practice which includes in its consequences almost every evil, physical and moral.' So zealous was he in the cause of sobriety that he introduced into his *Life of Burns* a disquisition on the injurious effects of wine, with some quite irrelevant observations on opium, tobacco, tea, and coffee, all of which he described as narcotics. He went so far as to tamper with Maria Riddel's noble panegyric on Burns, in a way that would nowadays be strongly disapproved. Mrs. Riddel referred to the poet's penchant for 'the

joy-inspiring bowl,' but that phrase was too seductive for Currie, so he changed it into 'the flowing bowl.' She had asked, 'Who would wish to reprove the failings of Burns, consecrated with such lively touches of nature?' but that was condoning inebriety because of its stimulating effects on fancy, and so Currie substituted *feelings* for *failings*, and the sentence runs, 'Who would wish to reprove the feelings Burns consecrated with such lively touches of nature?' which is nonsense.

Currie loved Burns and paid generous tribute to the force and versatility of his talents, to his independent spirit and magnanimous disposition, but he could not, fashioned as he was, overlook or excuse his delinquencies, and was constrained while extolling him as a hero to hold him up at the same time as a horrid example. He was harsh and austere in his judgment of his character. Throughout his biography he lost no opportunity of improving the occasion and of emphasising the shortcomings of its subject.

As regards Burns' early years, Currie could find no room for censure. He was dependent for his knowledge of them on Burns' personal

recollections contained in his letter to Dr. Moore, on his brother Gilbert's reminiscences communicated to Mrs. Dunlop, and on those of Murdoch set forth in his letter to Mr. Walker, records that show the boyhood and youth of Burns to have been singularly exemplary. He grew up amidst hardships and privations which must have snuffed out any of our modern highbrow poets of the neurotic type, but happily under the tutelage and in the companionship of a father somewhat stern but of great intelligence and worth; and the only filial impiety with which he could reproach himself in after years was that in his seventeenth year, in spite of his father's objections, he took lessons in dancing. 'For several years,' said Gilbert, speaking of the Mount Oliphant time, 'butcher's meat was a stranger to the house, while all the members of the family exerted themselves to the utmost of their strength and rather beyond it.' When a boy of fifteen, Burns performed the work of a grown man. And yet in this hard life, combining, as he has said, 'the cheerless gloom of the hermit with the toil of a galley slave,' he bore himself with a stout heart, and succeeded in a marvellous measure

in self-education. No chance of gaining knowledge escaped him, and so apt and diligent was he that a year of intermittent attendance at the parish school at Dalrymple, week about with his brother, and three weeks spent with Murdoch at Ayr when he was fourteen—one week before harvest devoted to English grammar and two after it to the study of French—were as profitable to him as an undergraduate college course would have been to another lad. Books were the only outlet from monotonous drudgery. And such of these as fell in his way he eagerly devoured. There were no pictures in these days, no football matches, no penny papers; penny village readings had not arrived, penny weddings came at rare intervals, and kirk and market were the only available entertainments. The deprivation of amusement in the morning of life must in the case of Burns have deepened the gloom that overshadowed its noonday.

During these years Burns, although for the most part associated with sedate and industrious men, was occasionally, as at Kirkoswald when studying mensuration and dialling, and at Irvine when learning flax-dressing, thrown

into the society of those who were lawless and dissolute, but he suffered no contamination, and the adventure no doubt did him good by taking him out of his sequestered lot, and by enlarging his knowledge of human nature. He says, in his hyperbolic way, that at Kirkoswald when he was in his nineteenth year, he learnt 'to fill his glass and mix without fear in a drunken squabble,' and that at Irvine in his twenty-third year he took part in a welcome carousal to the New Year, but the evidence is clear that at this age he was sober and self-respecting in no ordinary degree, considering the customs of the time. 'He never deviated,' says Gilbert, 'from the strictest rules of virtue and modesty, till he reached his twenty-third year.' . . . 'Notwithstanding these circumstances (his having become a freemason) and the praise he has bestowed on Scotch drink, which seems to have misled his historians, I do not recollect during these seven years, nor till towards the end of his becoming author (when his growing celebrity occasioned his being often in company), to have ever seen him intoxicated, nor was he at all given to drinking.' His temperance and frugality were all that could

be desired. Burns himself, writing to Murdoch, with whom he was confidential, on January 15, 1783, when he was twenty-four, declared: 'I have indeed kept pretty clear of vicious habits.' In very straitened circumstances during the Lochlee tenancy, when his slender income, which he never exceeded, was seven pounds per annum, he consoled himself by some love passages tender and pure, and by giving wing as he held the plough, or cast peats or carted coal, to his scarce fully fledged poetic faculty, passing unscathed through adolescence, which is the danger period in so far as the formation of intemperate habits is concerned.

Of the Mossgiel and Mauchline period, covering two eventful years of Burns' life, Currie had little to say, because he had little information. But he extends his meagre sketch by one of those discursive disquisitions in fine Johnsonian periods in which he was ever ready to indulge, this time on delicacy of literary taste, and elocution, anent Burns' connection with the Tarbolton and Mauchline Debating Societies. He could not, however, altogether get away from his obsession, and so

suggests that in the discussions of these societies Burns might be expected to take the *imprudent* side of the question, and regrets that 'fortune did not give to the energies of his mind habits of exertion which might have excluded other associations in which it must be acknowledged they were too often wasted as well as debased,' which is ludicrous when the strenuous efforts and labour of the poet at all ages are recalled.

Much of Burns' best work was done at Mossgiel while contending with its stubborn soil. He produced there 'Halloween,' 'To a Mouse,' 'The Jolly Beggars,' 'The Cotter's Saturday Night,' 'Address to the Deil,' 'The Vision,' 'The Twa Dogs,' 'To a Mountain Daisy,' and many incomparable ditties, and while he may occasionally at Mauchline have indulged too freely when consorting with enthusiastic friends, he had no time for drinking. He did foolishly commit himself in other ways, but when the Kilmarnock poems were published there was no allegation of serious inebriety against him. When not in the fields at Mossgiel he spent much of his time in his little garret transcribing his thick-coming fancies.

Burns' Edinburgh transit, so brilliant and so

brief, gave more scope for Currie's strictures, and for those of the carping critics who have followed in his train. 'A taste for letters,' we are told, 'is not always conjoined with habits of temperance and regularity, and Edinburgh, at the period of which we speak, contained perhaps an uncommon proportion of men of considerable talent, devoted to social excesses, in which their talents were wasted and debased,' which is scarcely complimentary to Lord Glencairn, Dr. Blair, Dr. Gregory, Lord Monboddo, the Tytlers of Woodhouselea, and Dr. Blacklock, all of whom constantly entertained Burns while he was the lion of the season. He entered, it is affirmed, 'with his usual vehemence into parties of this description, and gradually lost some portion of his relish for more pure but less poignant pleasures.' 'The sudden alteration in his habits of life operated on him physically as well as morally. The humble fare of an Ayrshire peasant he had exchanged for the luxuries of the Scottish metropolis, and the effect of the change on his ardent constitution could not be inconsiderable . . . he had embarked on the tide of dissipation, and was borne along its stream.' But there is clear

and conclusive testimony as to the propriety of Burns' behaviour while mingling with Edinburgh society, as to his dignified self-possession, and as to the charm of his conversation. The habits of the city were convivial, and he entered freely into its life, but not one single instance is recorded in which he transgressed the recognised boundary. He did betimes desert the exalted circle of the *litterati* for groups of humbler station; and no wonder that he sought relaxation from unaccustomed stiffness in free-and-easy fellowship. But even in the taverns he frequented and in the Chrochallan Club he met men like Nicol Smellie, Dunbar, and Alexander Cunningham, who, although Bohemian in their tastes, were of honourable character and respectable position. But the gleesome supper parties and the late nights never interfered with Burns' daily social engagements, nor with the clearness of his head, for all through his Edinburgh triumph he kept an eye on his prospective position and means of earning a livelihood.

Dugald Stewart, who saw more than any one else of Burns during his first winter in Edinburgh, writing to Currie after Burns' death,

said : ' Notwithstanding various reports I heard during the preceding winter of Burns' predilection for convivial and not very select society, I should have concluded in favour of his habits of sobriety from all of him that ever fell under my own observation. He told me, indeed, himself that the weakness of his stomach was such as to deprive him entirely of any merit in his temperance.'

Dr. Blair, who was not likely to countenance unconventional behaviour, wrote to Burns in May 1787, when he had left Edinburgh: ' Your situation as you say was indeed very singular ; and in being brought out all at once from the shades of deepest privacy to so great a share of public notice and observation, you had to stand a severe trial. I am happy that you have stood it so well, and as far as I have known or heard, though in the midst of many temptations, without reproach to your character and behaviour. . . . You have laid the foundation for just public esteem.'

Burns lived under the limelight in Edinburgh, and the worst and the best of him have been made known to us. And the worst is that occasionally, and small blame to him, espe-

cially during his second winter there, when his patrons were less kind and hospitable than in the heyday of his renown, he joined some roysterers in their midnight revels—not broken and disreputable men, but lawyers, merchants, tradesmen, teachers, who sought social enjoyment of the kind then in vogue, and which was enlivened by wit and song, if sometimes disfigured by bacchanalian excesses. No wonder that Burns sometimes of an evening, when without more aristocratic engagement, preferred the warmth and hilarity of the Chrochallan Fencibles, or of the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge, to a solitary sederunt in the three-shilling-a-week single-room lodging in Baxter's Close, which he shared with his attached friend Richmond. It is inconceivable that Burns during his sojourn in Edinburgh, moving daily in refined society, frequently the honoured guest of learned and upright men, as at that memorable meeting at the house of Dr. Adam Ferguson where he bestowed literary ordination on Sir Walter Scott, should, as has been alleged, have been spending his nights in debauchery. That legend has been created partly by the shadows

thrown backwards by subsequent events, and partly by his own unguarded statements. The Edinburgh letters, especially those to Mrs. Dunlop, are a proof that at this juncture he was remarkably clear and sober-minded, but in his correspondence with his familiar friends, then and at other times, he had a trick of making the most exaggerated statements about his own proceedings, and of misusing the word dissipation, which as he employed it meant merely waste of time and frivolous amusement, but which most of his biographers have accepted as synonymous with drunkenness. In a letter to Mr. Burness he refers to his residence in Edinburgh as 'one continued scene of dissipation,' in this sense.

The Edinburgh 'bouts,' of which so much has been made, must have been comparatively harmless affairs, if they all ended as one to which he has himself alluded. Writing to Clarinda on January 8, 1788, he says: 'I have just risen from a two hours' bout after supper with silly and sordid souls, who could relish nothing in common with me but the port. One o'clock. 'Tis now the witching hour of night!' And then follows the letter

which could have been indited by no partially intoxicated man, for it is a pattern of lucidity, and gives a thoughtful outline of his religious belief.

There seems to me to be no ground for supposing that Burns during his two winters in Edinburgh or during his Border and Highland tours gave way to alcoholic intemperance to an unusual or disabling degree. He seems truly to have kept his balance as few men so placed could have done, and to have been 'a burnin' and a shinin' light' amidst much obfuscation. Mr. Arthur Bruce, a gentleman of great discernment, assured Heron that he had seen the poet steadily resist such solicitations and allurements to convivial enjoyment as scarcely any other person could have withstood. Mr. Miller, a clear-seeing business man, would scarcely have accepted him as a tenant at Ellisland had he thought he was addicted to drink.

Burns' first two years at Ellisland were perhaps the happiest of his existence. In going there he was boldly facing a laborious future and leaving dreams behind, golden dreams that must have floated through his

imaginative mind during the days of adulation, but he had always realised that these were dreams, and had looked forward to a return to a settled life. He referred to his 'will-o'-the-wisp appearance' in Edinburgh, and added : ' I could almost lament the time when a momentary acquaintance with wealth and splendour put me so much out of conceit with the sworn companions of my road through life—insignificance and poverty.' He was captivated by the beautiful situation of Ellisland, and by the sweet lispings of the Nith that flows past it, and these more than agricultural acumen determined his choice of it. He took possession of it, intent on providing for his wife and child and full of good hope and virtuous resolutions, to which on the whole he manfully adhered. The house had to be rebuilt, and to that task he applied himself with his wonted energy. He was clerk of the works and had to see the specifications carried out, but he also took part in digging the foundation, collecting the stones, seeking the sand, and casting the lime ; and that there was ' nae ca' canny ' about him may be gathered from the remembrance of one of the men who worked

with him, and who said, ' he beat a' I ever met for a dour lift.'

When the foundation stone of the house was laid, Burns lifted his hat and asked a blessing ; when the homestead was finished he brought his wife there with a quaint ritual ; and during his five years of occupancy, first as farmer *simplicitas*, and then as farmer plus excise-man, with growing anxieties as the years went on, for Demeter was never kind to him, he was steady and industrious. He might have been seen in the spring ' directing the plough, a labour in which he excelled, or with a white sheet containing his seed corn slung across his shoulder, striding with measured steps along the furrow,' humming as he went, and that he did not hum in vain let ' O' a' the Airts the Wind can blaw,' ' To Mary in Heaven,' and ' Tam o' Shanter ' attest. No hypocrite was Burns, but in the early days at Ellisland he and his family walked every Sunday four miles to the Dunscore Parish Church. ' The fact is,' says Robert Chambers, who took a more distant but much more correct view of Burns than did Currie, ' the fact is, he was not up till this time [the Ellisland

time] liable to the reproach of an unusual degree of intemperance. He was of too social and mirth-loving a nature to refuse to join in occasional revelries such as then too frequently occurred, amongst gentlemen as amongst commoners, but he liked these scenes rather in spite of than from a love of drinking.' All his old Ellisland servants testify to the sobriety of his life there. But Currie will not have it so; he pursues him to Ellisland and throughout his sojourn there with the alcoholic bugbear, and seizes any colourable occurrence by which to enforce his contention. He opined that it was unfortunate that Burns was not able to settle at once with his wife at Ellisland, for while the house was building he had, from time to time, to visit her at Mauchline, and as Mauchline was forty-six miles from Ellisland he had generally to spend a night at an inn on the road, 'and so sometimes,' says Currie, 'he fell into bad company and forgot sober resolutions.' But Burns was at that time no such weakling, and Currie's allegation is a pure assumption. We may be sure that if anything of the kind had occurred we should have heard of it from Burns himself, who was at this season deeply

in love and rich in contrition and good intentions, and who was never slow to report his own backslidings. He made out his journeys to Mauchline without any discreditable incident, and the letters written there always the day after these journeys bear no trace of overnight revelry. The inns at which he stopped for the night on these Mauchline journeys were at Sanquhar, Wanlockhead, or New Cumnock, and in some cases there were circumstances which show that he could not have been incapacitated. At Sanquhar he was turned out late at night, and after supper, on the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Oswald and her train, had to mount his horse and go on to New Cumnock; and at Wanlockhead, where he arrived late in a biting frost, he was able to indite some witty verses to the blacksmith, to induce him to come and sharpen his horse's shoes.

But when journeys to Mauchline were no longer necessary, and he was safely ensconced with his wife in 'a hame o' his ain,' he was still, if we may believe Currie, yielding to his old enemy. 'In a little while,' says this lugubrious monitor, 'temptation assailed him

nearer home. He was received at the tables of the gentlemen of Nithsdale with kindness, even with respect. The social parties too often seduced him from his rustic labours and his rustic fare, overthrew the unsteady fabric of his resolutions, and inflamed those propensities which temperance might have weakened and prudence ultimately suppressed.'

It is true that while at Ellisland, mostly before the busy gauger days, Burns did join many pleasant dinner parties given by Mr. Miller of Dalswinton, General M'Murdo of Drumlanrig, and others, but it is invariably recorded that these dinners were followed by music and poetry, in which he took part, and they certainly never led him to neglect his farm. It is, however, to one particular dinner party that Currie wishes to direct attention, that which took place at Friars Carse on October 16, 1789, when the contest for the Whistle took place. Burns has been much disparaged by the sanctimonious commentators for his participation in this bibulous competition for an historical relic, in which three doughty champions engaged, but the fact is that he did not take any immediate part

in the orgy, the saga of which he wrote, nor did he share the fate of the combatants. 'I recollect well,' said William Hunter, the butler who witnessed the whole affair, 'that when the dinner was over Burns quitted the table and went to a table in the same room that was placed in a window that looked south-west, and there he sat down for the night. I placed before him a bottle of rum and a bottle of brandy, which he did not finish, but left a good deal of each when he rose from the table after the gentlemen had gone to bed. . . . Burns walked home without assistance, and not being the worse for drink.'

There was another incident of the Ellisland time which caused Currie painful compunction, and that was the composition by Burns of 'O Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Maut.' Burns and his friend Masterton made their way in the autumn of 1789 to Craigieburn in Moffatdale, where his other friend Nicol was spending his holiday, and had there a joyous meeting which Burns celebrated in the inimitable ballad. Referring to the joyous meeting, Currie says: 'These three honest fellows—all men of uncommon talent—are now all under the turf.'

But the observation lacks point, for Nicol lived till 1797 and Masterton till 1799. We do not know of what Masterton died; Nicol may and may not have succumbed to alcohol, for it was jaundice that carried him off; and as for Burns, it was assuredly neither maut nor wine nor barley beer that was the immediate cause of his death. In this connection, one recalls that Burns when on his Highland tour met at Blair Castle the Duchess of Atholl and her sisters, Mrs. Graham and Miss Cathcart—all women of uncommon beauty and in the prime of life, all of whom predeceased him, although it will not be suggested that any one of them had ‘a wee drap in her e’e.’

Principal Shairp, who surpasses Currie in his inept moralising, thus comments on ‘O Willie Brewed a Peck o’ Maut’: ‘The song we read with very mingled feelings, when we think that it may have helped some toppers since Burns’ day a little faster on the road to ruin.’ But this pernicious song, Wordsworth, who was a water-drinker, and who it has been said could never in the Lake Country be at a loss for his favourite beverage, regarded as a pleasant exaggeration, one of these mirthful

rhapsodies of good-fellowship which so many of our great poets have thrown off.

After July 1789, when Burns resolved to convert Ellisland into a dairy farm under the care of his wife, and to take up in earnest his work as an exciseman until the end of his term there in 1791, he was too actively employed to have any time for dissipation. He had ten parishes to supervise, rode on an average two hundred miles in a week, and sometimes forty in a day in order to be at home at night. It is indisputable that he was zealous and punctual in the discharge of his duties, helpful at home and copious in correspondence. There was never a suggestion that he was remiss or was anything but vigilant and tactful as a gauger. He was worried, for the farm did not prosper, and flurried too by visitors who came on hero-worship intent, but he did not unduly resort to alcohol for comfort and support. He did not dip too deeply into the marble punch-bowl when now and then it was brought out of its dusty corner for the regalement of his guests. All the servants who lived with him at Ellisland testified that he was frugal and regular in his habits. He was

leading a sober, steady, industrious life, and was on the whole hopeful and reconciled to his fate, and yet it is of this epoch that Currie says that he was 'flushed with irregular excitement and exasperated alternately by contempt of others and contempt of himself.'

In 1791, disappointed but undaunted, Burns with his belongings moved into Dumfries, where he spent the remainder of his days in the Wee Vennel till May 1793, and in the Mill Vennel till his death. It was in Dumfries that the clouds of calumny enveloped him. His story then, says Henley, 'was a story of decadence.' 'Hitherto,' says Currie—and the preliminary admission is scarcely consistent with his previous statements—'Burns, though addicted to excess in social parties, had abstained from the habitual use of alcohol, and his constitution had not suffered any permanent injury from the irregularities of his conduct. In Dumfries temptations to the sin that so easily beset him continually presented themselves, and his irregularities grew by degrees into habits. These temptations unhappily occurred during his engagements in the business of his office as well as during his hours of relaxation, and

although he foresaw the consequences of yielding to them, his appetite and sensations, which could not pervert the dictates of his judgment, finally triumphed over his power of will.' 'He was perpetually stimulated by alcohol in one or other of its various forms,' Currie says in another place; adding, 'he who suffers the pollution of inebriation, how shall he escape the other pollution?' the meaning of which is that Burns, who had been for years an occasional inebriate, became in Dumfries an habitual and abandoned drunkard. And yet, as Wilson said, not a man could be found in Dumfries who had ever seen Burns intoxicated.

The sources from which Currie derived his information about Burns in Dumfries, the information on which he founded that damning judgment which has had so far-reaching and defamatory an effect, cannot be regarded as satisfactory: far from it. For Burns' early life he had, as I have said, documentary evidence—that of Burns himself, his brother Gilbert, Mr. Murdoch, all of an authentic character; but for the later years he had to trust to his personal observation during a very brief interview with Burns, of which he kept no notes, in

Dumfries in 1792 ; to conversations with Gilbert Burns and Syme during a visit of a fortnight's duration which they paid him in Liverpool in 1798, with some subsequent correspondence with them ; to the poems, the Common-Place Book, and a certain number of the letters of Burns which he had before him, and to such scraps of gossip as he could pick up. His own passing glance at Dumfries is of no consequence, but it left an entirely favourable impression on his mind. Gilbert Burns afterwards repudiated and contradicted all he had previously told him, and Syme was an entirely untrustworthy witness. Syme loved Burns, and befriended him and his family after he was gone. Burns reciprocated his kindly feelings, found him a genial host and companion, and had some faith in his literary judgment, for he asked his opinion of some of his compositions. Syme was a good specimen of the Scottish gentleman of the old school, well bred, intelligent, cultivated, hospitable, and a bit of a *bon vivant*, but he was proud of his association with Burns, and sometimes allowed his imagination to supersede his memory in his reminiscences of him. His story of the genesis of ' Scots,

wha hae wi' Wallace bled' during a thunderstorm on a Galloway moor was pure fiction, for we have Burns' word for it that he composed it in an evening walk by the Nith; and his turgid picture of Burns drawing his sword cane on him in his own house at Ryedale because he declined to draw another bottle of wine, is obviously a fancy sketch. He narrates that one night at Gatehouse, when on the Galloway journey, Burns insisted on their both getting 'hopelessly drunk,' but at any rate they started in good condition very early next morning. It may well be that Syme, in answering leading questions by Currie, gave him an entirely false impression of Burns' doings in Dumfries. It is fortunate that he did not accept the invitation to write the Life of Burns.

Currie while preparing the Life was avid for information about Burns and credulous too, for how else can we account for his accepting and publishing the preposterous canard of the two English gentlemen (unidentified) who reported that they discovered Burns fishing on the Nith 'with a cap of fox-skin on his head, a loose great-coat fixed round him with a belt,

from which depended an enormous Highland broadsword'? Burns was never a mountebank. The Burns stage was not clear when Currie took possession of it. There survived many of those whom Burns had offended and lampooned, many who had resented his political opinions and intrusions on ecclesiastical controversy, many who gratified their self-importance by claiming an acquaintance and even familiarity with him which they had not enjoyed. When after his death there developed a belated but intense interest in him, there arose a demand for memorabilia, met by a liberal supply, much of which was supposition, and which Currie and later biographers have had to sift with more or less success. It is curious to note how in the afterglow the most insignificant trifles connected with Burns have been thought deserving of registration. Principal Shairp, in the middle of last century, found out one person who remembered having seen Burns though he had never spoken to him, and all that this venerable octogenarian remembered was 'the blink of his black eye'—a somewhat equivocal reminiscence, and superfluous too, seeing that the magic of Burns' black

eye has been the theme of all who have written about him, from Sir Walter Scott downwards. For a long time any link with Burns was a distinction, and I recollect that in the days of my youth in Dumfries an old and highly esteemed professional man was pointed out as notable as the boy who was kicked at Burns' funeral. It appeared that as an urchin he had gone to see the procession, and having got in its way, was thus summarily put aside by one of the volunteers.

For some of his sombre misrepresentation of Burns, Currie is to be excused, by his too literal acceptance of what Burns said about himself. David Wilson, with an unusually clear insight into Burns' problem, says that Carlyle underestimated Burns by accepting as faults the self-reproaches which were in truth a creditable sign of real humility, and Currie did the same to a vastly greater extent. He took at their face value the self-accusations which are so profusely scattered through the letters and poems, many of which were groundless or grotesque amplifications of venial offences or mere anguished exclamations. He never reached the proper age for remorse,

but he was consumed by it from his early manhood onwards. His impulsive tendencies sometimes gave him cause for self-condemnation and repentance, but beyond all that he was often conscience-stricken when he had not the slightest occasion to be so. He was as true genius as has ever been and ever will be, and, as Aristotle found out, disposed to melancholy. He called it hypochondriasis. 'My constitution and frame,' he wrote to Dr. Moore, 'were originally blasted with the inalienable taint of hypochondriasis which poisons my existence,' and again and again he recurs to his hypochondriacal tendencies; but it was not hypochondriasis in the medical sense of the term, that is to say morbid apprehensions and delusions about his bodily health, from which he suffered—it would have been better for him had he given more attention to that—but from an inherited predisposition to nervous depression, aggravated by the pressure of incessant and wearing toil, with inferior and perhaps scanty nutriment in his boyhood and youth. Thus came his stooping shoulders.

Louis Stevenson, in his lamentable and acri-

monious 'Study of Burns,' will have it that he was a contemptible hypochondriac. 'The strong young ploughman,' he writes, 'who feared no competitor at the flail, suffered like a fine lady from sleeplessness and vapours; he would fall into the blackest melancholy and be filled with remorse for the past and terror for the future. At a touch of sickness he prostrated himself before God, in what I can only call unmanly penitence.'

But nothing could be more egregiously wrong than this, for Burns' melancholy was never of the egotistic type, never concentrated on his own corporeal conditions, which, although often grievous enough, he bore unflinchingly, but was an expression of his intense sensibility activated by his broad sympathies and ardent affections. It was about his altruistic relations, his failures in duty, his errors and shortcomings, his obligations and responsibilities that he distressed himself, and he was of course perturbed by the sorrow and suffering he saw around him, and not free from those speculative doubts and forebodings which must present themselves to every such large-minded man in this unintelligible world. It was not vapours

that afflicted him, but genuine and often exaggerated contrition. In 'The Vision,' written at Mossgiel when he was twenty-five, young and vigorous, and still unsullied in reputation, he thus repined :

All in this mottie, misty clime,
I backward mus'd on wasted time :
How I had spent my youthfu' prime,
 An' done naething,
But stringin' blethers up in rhyme,
 For fools to sing.

And so on until ' the thoughtless follies ' of the ' Bard's Epitaph.' The letter to Dr. Moore was a long tissue of self-reproach. ' I have like Solomon turned my eyes to behold madness and folly, and have too frequently shaken hands with their intoxicating friendship.' His despondency sometimes bordered on despair. ' God have mercy on me ! a poor damned incautious duped unfortunate fool, victim of rebellious pride, hypochondriac imaginations, sensibility and Bedlam passions.' In 1794 he wrote, ' Regret ! Remorse ! Shame ! Ye three hell-hounds that ever dog my steps. Spare me ! Spare me !'

Whatever Burns' sins may have been, no

sinner ever more promptly, profusely, and earnestly repented. He was merciless to himself but ever merciful to others, blaming himself and forgetting his provocations and extenuating circumstances. In his last interview with Mrs. Riddel, a fortnight before his death, 'He lamented that he had written many epigrams on persons against whom he entertained no enmity, and whose characters he would be sorry to wound.'

It was no doubt to a considerable extent Burns' self-depreciations and Rabelaisian extravagances of statement that misled Currie and disposed him to accept as veracious all the tittle-tattle of Dumfries, and to pass on to futurity a distorted and besmirched representation of the man. And it was particularly as regards Burns' intemperate habits that Currie was led astray by the letters; for in these, Burns often, as if in mere bravado, boasted to his familiar friends of supposititious transgressions. He was scrupulously truthful. 'I would not,' he said, writing to Graham of Fintry, 'tell a deliberate falsehood—no, not though even worse horrors, if that can be, than those I have mentioned hung over my

head.' But at the same time he did indulge in startling fictions. Thus, during his detention by a snowstorm at Ecclefechan in February 1795, he wrote to Thomson: 'I have been in a dilemma, either to get drunk, to forget these miseries; or to hang myself, to get rid of them. I have chosen the least, and am very drunk at your service.' Then there follows a very sensible and interesting letter, enclosing the chorus of 'O wat ye Wha's in yon Town,' which he had just composed. To that letter Thomson replied, 'Drunk or sober, your mind is never muddy!' But the Dumfries tittle-tattle was cruelly wrong, and Burns' demeanour there, instead of being as is supposed flagitious, was truly heroic. He was fighting against terrific odds—physical weakness, straitened circumstances, public suspicion, fear of official censure, of ruin, of desertion of friends; and although, as he said, he would gladly have laid himself in his mother's lap, fought bravely on. Every adverse incident of that time is susceptible of another gloss than that which has been put upon it. That he frequented the Globe Tavern is true, that he occasionally took more alcohol than was good for him is indisputable, that he en-

countered now and then undesirable company is allowed, that he once or twice foolishly committed himself, as in the quarrels with Mr. Bushby and Mrs. Riddel, cannot be denied; but that upon the whole, and having regard to the social standard of Dumfries and of the country at large at the time, and to the misfortunes that had befallen him, he departed himself with marvellous propriety, is I think demonstrable. He did not deserve the censures that have been heaped on him. Where is the Dumfriesian of the last decade of the eighteenth century who can throw the first stone. His performances speak for him. It was during that Dumfries period, while discharging with punctuality his routine duties as an exciseman, he produced that body of song that has made him the master lyricist of all time; and besides carrying on continuously a large and varied correspondence in which he discussed with sense and sound sentiment all sorts of topics, wrote to Thomson that series of fifty-seven letters, so keenly critical and richly suggestive. And yet we are asked to believe that he was then indulging in deep nocturnal potations, and was

being slowly poisoned by alcohol. *Credat Judæus !*

But apart from inferences which may be drawn from his achievements, there is direct evidence that in the later years in Dumfries Burns was not the drink-dilapidated genius that has been supposed, positive evidence that Mr. Robert Chambers did a national service in securing, although he rather failed to appreciate its force, and that entirely outweighs Currie's vague contentions. Mr. Alexander Findlater, Burns' superior officer in the Excise at Dumfries, and whose connection with him commenced immediately after his admission and continued to the hour of his death, said : ' In that time the superintendence of his behaviour was a branch of my special province, and it may be supposed I would not be an inattentive observer of the general conduct of a man and a poet so celebrated by his countrymen. In the former capacity he was exemplary in his attention and ever jealous of the least imputation on his vigilance ; it was not till the end of his days that there was any falling off in this respect, and this was amply accounted for by the pressure of disease and accumu-

lating infirmities. I will further avow that I never saw him—which was very frequently while he lived at Ellisland, and still more so after he removed to Dumfries—but in hours of business he was quite capable of discharging the duties of his office, nor was he ever known to drink by himself or seen to indulge in the use of liquor in a forenoon. I have seen Burns in all his various phases—in his convivial moments, in his sober moods, and in the bosom of his family—and I never beheld anything like the gross enormities with which he is now charged. . . . That when he sat down with a few friends whom he liked he was apt to prolong the social hour beyond the bounds which prudence would dictate, is unquestionable, but in his family, I will venture to say, he was never seen otherwise than attentive and affectionate to a high degree.' Shakespeare probably was sometimes a little late at the Mermaid, and there are London clubs that prolong their convivialities beyond the 'wee short hour ayont the twal.'

Mr. James Grey, who was Rector of the Academy in Dumfries, bore witness that Burns did sometimes mingle with society unworthy

of him. 'He was,' he observes, 'of social and convivial nature. He was courted by all classes of men for the fascinating power of his conversation, but over his social scene uncontrolled passion never presided. . . . He was seldom intoxicated. Over the social bowl his wit flashed for hours together. . . . In the morning hours I never saw him like one suffering from the effects of last night's intemperance. The drunkard soon becomes besotted and is shunned even by the convivial. Had he been so, he could not long have continued the idol of every party. It came under my own view professionally that he superintended the education of his children with a degree of care I have never seen surpassed by any parent in any rank of life whatever.'

Mrs. Burns—dear, devoted Jean Armour—resented the aspersions on her husband's memory. She assured Mr. M'Diarmid that his convivial habits had been greatly exaggerated by report. She asserted that she had never once known him return home at night so greatly affected by liquor but that he was able as usual to see that the house was secure, and to take off his own clothes without assistance.

Jessie Lewars, who was Mrs. Burns' most intimate friend, who ministered to Burns so tenderly in his last illness, and to whom that most moving of love-songs that sings itself without the aid of Mendelssohn, 'O wert thou in the cauld blast,' was addressed, averred that as far as circumstances left Burns to his own inclinations, his personal and domestic habits were simple and temperate. 'As he was often detained by company from the dinner provided for him by his wife, when he came home and found no dinner he was never in the least troubled or irritated, but sat down contentedly to a Dunlop cheese and some bread and butter. He was always anxious to see his wife well dressed, and bought her the best clothes he could afford. She was the first woman to appear in Dumfries in a gingham gown.' And this is the man of whom Currie tells us that 'the vehemence of his temper was often increased by stimulating liquors.'

Surely the testimony of these eye-witnesses is more trustworthy than the lucubrations of a legion of biographical scribblers all blindly following a misguided leader.

In August 1795 Mr. Pattison, an old friend

of Burns', passed through Dumfries, and invited him and Dr. Maxwell to dine at his hotel. Mr. Pattison's son thus records his recollection of the dinner: 'The poet was in his best vein. I can never forget the animation and glorious intelligence of his countenance, the rich, deep tones of his musical voice, and those matchless eyes which absolutely appeared to flash fire. It was not conversation I heard; it was an outburst of noble sentiment, brilliant wit, and a flood of sympathy. A lofty, pure, transcendent genius alone could have made so deep an impression on a mere boy.'

There is here no mention of any vinous excess accompanying the display of genius at a convivial meeting such as would undoubtedly have made a deep impression on a mere boy.

Professor Josiah Walker, that very superior person who forced his acquaintance on Burns, and did his best to disparage him, and who was properly castigated by Christopher North, could only say sententiously after entertaining Burns at dinner at his hotel in Dumfries in 1795: 'He on this occasion drank freely but was not intoxicated. A circumstance from which I

concluded, not only that his constitution was still unbroken (poor, short-sighted professor!), but that he was not addicted to solitary cordials, for if he had tasted liquor in the morning, he must have easily yielded to the excess of the evening.'

No unbiassed person examining the evidence at this distance of time can fail to conclude that Burns has been grossly slandered as regards his life in Dumfries, and that he did not, as has been currently believed, die of drink. On general grounds, which have been rehearsed, that conclusion is justified, and on medical grounds, when they are sought out and sorted, it is decisively confirmed. It is a remarkable fact that Dr. Maxwell, who attended Burns in his last illness, and by whose advice he went to the Brow-Well, never made any precise statement of the cause of death, and left no record of symptoms. He had been on terms of intimate friendship with Burns for several years, and Burns had in 1794 metrically noted his professional skill in the case of Miss Staig. He shared Burns' democratic principles and perhaps inflamed them, and helped to draw upon him the suspicion which caused him so much

pain and anxiety, for he had been a Jacobin, and while studying medicine in Paris had acted as one of the national guard round the scaffold of Louis XVI. and dipped his handkerchief in the royal blood. He bestirred himself after his patient's death on behalf of his widow and children, and he it was who supplied Currie with whatever particulars about Burns' health he possessed, particulars on which Currie founded his vague and misleading narrative. It was, we are told, an interruption in the process of digestion that was mainly at fault in Burns, and this disorder of the stomach led to depression of spirits, irregular movements of the heart, and fever and headaches. 'This predisposition to disease, which strict temperance of diet, regular exercise and sound sleep might have subdued, habits of a very different nature strengthened and inflamed. Perpetually stimulated by alcohol in one or other of its various forms, the inordinate actions of the circulating system became at length habitual, the process of nutrition was unable to supply the waste, and the powers of life began to fail. Upwards of a year before his death, there was an evident decline in our poet's personal appear-

ance, and although his appetite continued unimpaired, he was himself sensible that his constitution was sinking. . . . His temper became more irritable and gloomy; he fled from himself into society, often of the lowest kind. And in such company, that part of the convivial scene in which wine increases sensibility and excites benevolence was hurried over to reach the succeeding part over which uncontrolled passion generally presided. He who suffers the pollution of inebriation, how shall he escape other pollution? But let us refrain from the mention of errors, over which delicacy and humanity draw the veil.' The veil was a very transparent one. There can be no doubt about it. It was Currie's conviction that Burns died of drink and was a bad man.

For that view of Currie's, Dr. Maxwell was in some measure responsible; at any rate he never protested against it. Perhaps he really thought that Burns drank himself to death, for like Currie he was somewhat of a fanatic on the temperance question, and was willing, like Currie, to draw the veil. But when he attended Burns, he had not acquired the professional

insight and experience to which it is said he afterwards attained. He entirely failed to grasp the nature of the case or to prescribe the treatment which might have afforded relief. Had he done this, he might have arrested some of the calumnies of Burns which have obtained such wide diffusion.

That Burns did not die of alcohol is clear. It kills in two ways: directly, by its toxic action on the organs and tissues, and indirectly, by lowering the resistance of the body to the inroads of various diseases. The lethal effects of its direct action are unmistakable. It is not always easy to determine whether a motor-car driver is under the influence of alcohol, but there is no difficulty in concluding whether death has been directly due to it in any case. It kills in one of several well-defined ways, acute and chronic, and by not one of these did Burns reach his end. No one will venture to suggest that on his death-bed, or at any time, did he present muscular agitations and hallucinations of delirium tremens, or any of the familiar signs—jaundice and the rest of them—of cirrhosis or gin-drinker's liver. Never did he suffer from the pains and cramps and

paralysis that are indicative of multiple neuritis, one of the commonest pathological consequences of the abuse of alcohol, nor from the dropsy that is significant of renal trouble thus induced. And never did he show a trace of alcoholic dementia, betraying the destructive effects of the poison on the brain-cells, for to the last he was clear and in possession of his rare intellectual powers and full of healthy natural emotion. Mrs. Riddel, referring to her last interview with him a fortnight before his death, said: 'I have seldom seen his mind greater or more collected'; and his letters and poems in 1796 absolutely refute any suspicion of cerebral decay.

It is abundantly obvious that Burns did not succumb to direct alcoholic poisoning, so if alcohol caused his death it must have done so by undermining his strength, and opening the door to some intercurrent malady. That was no doubt the popular notion. It was believed that he had by constant alcoholic saturation so shattered his constitution as to be easily snuffed out by any passing ailment. Chambers thought so, for he said: 'The Bard's life was cut short by an accidental disease in the midst of a

career attended by no essential privations and not unhopeful.' Carlyle is in the same vein. 'We are not medically informed,' he writes, 'whether any continuation of years was at this period probable for Burns—whether his death is to be looked on as in some sense an accidental event, or only as the natural consequence of a long series of events that had preceded it.'

Burns' death was not an accidental event, but the natural consequence of a long series of events that had preceded it, though these events were not of the nature that Carlyle surmised. Burns died of endocarditis, a disease of the substance and lining membrane of the heart, with the origination of which alcohol had nothing to do, though it is possible that an injudicious use of alcohol may have hastened its progress. It was rheumatism that was the undoing of Burns. It attacked him in early years, damaged his heart, embittered his life, and cut short his career. It is strange that with all the documents before him this should have escaped Currie, for he himself suffered from endocarditis, the offspring of rheumatism, and died of it five years after completing his *Life of Burns*. In 1777, when a student in

Edinburgh, after a walk of thirty-two miles on a hot day, during which he had bathed twice, he took a third bathe in the Tweed at sun-down, contracted rheumatic fever, followed by an affection of the heart which interfered with his work, caused him great discomfort, necessitated his retirement from practice, and closed his life in his fifty-first year. He must have had painful experiences similar to those described by Burns, which in the case of Burns, eminent physician though he was, he ascribed to a surplusage of strong drink.

It is only quite recently that the disastrous consequences of rheumatism in early life have been realised and differentiated. It is now known that heart disease, one of the principal killing diseases in adult life, has its beginning, in a very large proportion of cases, in childhood and youth, in some rheumatic affection that escapes notice or is regarded as unimportant. A feverish cold with some growing pains may be the starting-point of lifelong debility, ending in premature death. The Ministry of Health has warned us that heart failure thus induced is responsible for a far larger mortality and industrial loss than has

hitherto been suspected. Dr. A. P. Thompson, Medical Officer of the Birmingham Education Authority, has just reported that there are at this time in that city three thousand children thus blemished. They are suffering from heart disease of rheumatic origin, and unless proper treatment is forthcoming, cannot be expected to live past middle age.

Well, Burns had heart disease of rheumatic origin, which cut him off at middle age, and no doubt dated from childhood. In all likelihood it was in the 'auld clay biggin', in the damp Ayrshire climate and not very weather-tight, some 'Janwar blast' blew in the germ of lifelong perturbation. The offspring of Scottish peasants in these days were left to harden as best they could, and no particular notice would be taken of an inconspicuous illness. But if on the occurrence of that first inconspicuous illness Burns had been put to bed in blankets for three months, the whole tenor of his days might have been different from what it was.

At Mount Oliphant, from his thirteenth to his fifteenth year, the heart trouble was well declared. 'He was almost constantly,' says

Gilbert, 'afflicted in the evenings with a dull headache, which at a future period of his life was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart, and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night-time.' Then, too, he became subject to those attacks of despondency which recurred from time to time during the rest of his life. These were no doubt connected with the condition of the heart, but were in some degree, as Gilbert thought, due to the hardships and privations he had to undergo. At thirteen he had to assist in threshing the corn, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm, for there were no other hired servants, male or female, while all this time, like the rest of the family, he had to live very sparingly. 'The anguish of mind we felt,' says Gilbert, 'at our tender years under these straits and difficulties was very great.'

From the Mount Oliphant period onwards, through the Lochlee and Mossgiel time, although the records are scant, we have indications that his malady was still with him. At Irvine, when engaged in flax-dressing in 1781 and twenty-two years of age, he had a three months' attack of 'vapours,' which he said he shuddered to

recall, and about which he wrote to his father, December 1781: 'My health is nearly the same as when you were here, only my sleep is a little sounder, and on the whole I am rather better than otherwise, though I mend by very slow degrees. The weakness of my nerves has so debilitated my mind that I dare neither review my past wants nor look forward into futurity, for the least anxiety in my breast produces most unhappy effects on my whole frame. *P.S.*—My meal is nearly out, but I am going to borrow till I get more.' At Mossgiel in 1784 there was an exacerbation of his disease. The movements of the heart were seriously affected; he became liable to fainting fits, particularly in the night-time, and as a remedy he resorted to cold baths. A barrel of cold water stood near his bedside, and into this he was obliged to plunge when threatened with an access of his ailment. His sensations, which only those who have thus suffered can fully realise, were terrible, kept him in fear of sudden death, and led to acute compunction for errors real or imaginary, and to religious reflections.

Timor mortis conturbat me.

Like Dunbar, in great sickness he was moved to poesy, and composed, as he tells us, a prayer, 'when fainting fits and other alarming symptoms of pleurisy or some other dangerous disorder,' which still threatened him, first put nature on the alarm.

O Thou unknown, Almighty Cause
 Of all my hope and fear!
 In whose dread presence, ere an hour,
 Perhaps I must appear!
 If I have wander'd in those paths
 Of life I ought to shun—
 As something, loudly, in my breast,
 Remonstrates I have done—

That was nearer the mark than he imagined. It was something in his breast—his poor embarrassed heart—that was distressing him, and remonstrating against the want of suitable treatment. It was in similar acute fits of physical and mental prostration that he penned the ode to 'Despondency,' the 'Stanzas written in Prospect of Death,' and the 'Prayer under the Pressure of Violent Anguish.'

It is characteristic of the mild types of this insidious form of heart disease from which Burns suffered, that its victims, until it is far advanced, are able to go about and take an

active share in affairs, as if there was nothing the matter with them. But they are visited at different intervals during its course of twenty or thirty years by feverish attacks, significant often of another milestone on the downward journey in which, with a quickened pulse, they become weak and qualmish, and are highly strung, nervous, and easily agitated. It is attacks of this kind that are occasionally tabulated henceforth in the correspondence, and of which we gain glimpses in the biography. In December 1786, after his arrival in Edinburgh, he wrote to Mr. John Ballantine: 'I arrived here a fortnight ago, and have suffered ever since I came to town with a miserable headache and stomach complaint, but am now a good deal better.' Professor Dugald Stewart, referring to Burns' visit to him in the summer of 1787, says: 'I was, however, somewhat alarmed when he confessed to me, the first night he spent in my house, after his winter's campaign in town, that he had been much disturbed when in bed by a palpitation at the heart, which he said was a complaint to which he had of late become subject.' In August of the same year, writing to Dr. Moore from

Mauchline, Burns intimated : ' For some months past I have been rambling over the country, but I am now confined with some lingering complaints, originating, as I take it, in the stomach.' Burns more than once ascribes his sufferings to his stomach, and in these days, before the stethoscope and sphygmograph had been invented and the clinical thermometer brought into use, diseases of the heart were not seldom erroneously attributed to that adjacent organ, even by medical men. Currie traced to the stomach the ' headaches and violent and irregular movements of the heart ' from which Burns so often suffered.

On January 20, 1788, Burns informed Clarinda of ' an old indisposition, accompanied by which make me good for nothing, so that I can scarce hold up my head.'

While the building of the new house at Ellisland was going on, a work in which Burns took so energetic a part and perhaps overstrained himself, he had to occupy a miserable hovel as a lodging, and had a return of his rheumatism. He wrote to Mrs. Dunlop, April 28, 1788 : ' I had slept in an apartment where the force of the winds and rains was only

mitigated by being sifted through numberless apertures in the windows, walls, etc. In consequence I was, on Sunday, Monday, and part of Tuesday, unable to stir out of bed, with all the miserable effects of a violent cold.'

Even in the happy, busy days at Ellisland his old enemy clung to him, and we hear of much ill-health. In a letter to Mrs. Dunlop, his ever kind and appreciative friend, of December 13, 1789, he says: 'I am groaning under the miseries of a diseased nervous system—a system, the state of which is most conducive to our happiness, or the most productive of our misery. For now near three weeks I have been so ill with a nervous headache that I have been obliged for a time to give up my Excise books, being scarce able to lift my head, much less to ride.' A month later, January 14, 1790, he told Gilbert: 'My nerves are in a — state. I feel that hated hypochondria in every atom of both body and soul.' At the same time he apprised Mr. W. Dunbar: 'I have had a tract of bad health most part of this winter.' On February 20, 1790, he wrote to Clarinda: 'I have been ill the whole winter. An incessant headache, depression of spirits,

and all the truly miserable consequences of a deranged nervous system have made dreadful havoc of health and peace.' It is to be remembered that up till this time, if we except the few months in Edinburgh, Burns had been a sober and even—except on rare occasions—an abstinent man, and that alcohol could have had nothing to do with the causation of the illness from which he suffered, and which was in train with the symptoms which subsequently supervened.

In March 1791, when on one of his peregrinations as a gauger, his horse came down with him and he broke his arm. The shock of the accident and the pain and disablement which followed it, and which he described as being on the rack and lasted for several weeks, cannot but have done further injury to his already much impaired health.

In October 1791 came the abandonment by Burns of his unprofitable farm, and his removal into the dingy and, as we should now say, insanitary quarters in the Wee Vennel, Dumfries, where he no longer enjoyed fresh air and an enchanting prospect. He was in a different and less wholesome atmosphere than

that of Ellisland, was more subject to temptation, and felt more in need of artificial support in his work and in the social efforts required of him. During the five years in Dumfries his insidious and inveterate malady continued its destructive course, and much that was set down to vicious indulgence was really due to its disturbing influence. He was eager to make good and create 'a happy fireside clime for weans and wife,' and to improve his position, and he was tortured—for a time, at any rate—by the fear of ruin and pecuniary distress, and so he ignored and concealed it as much as possible, and sought to suppress it by sheer force of will, with the aid of auxiliaries which though immediately helpful only hastened the catastrophe. Sympathy, profound sympathy, should mingle with any reprehension with which his irregularities may be regarded. The stress and tumult of his soul reacted on his wounded heart, which failed more and more in its service to his brain.

In the winter of 1792 Burns had some illness, we may assume of the usual kind, for he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop in January 1793: 'I am better, though not quite free of my com-

plaint.' And then he went on : ' You must not think, as you seem to insinuate, that in my way of life I want exercise. Of that I have enough, but occasional hard drinking is the devil to me. Against this I have again and again bent my resolution, and have greatly succeeded. Taverns I have totally abandoned ; it is the private parties in the family way, among the hard-drinking gentlemen of this country, that do me the mischief ; but even this I have more than half given over.'

It was in the winter of 1793 that a marked change for the worse took place, just after the misery and humiliation he had endured in connection with the notice taken of his too freely uttered political opinions by the Board of Excise. In February 1794 he wrote to Cunningham : ' For these two months I have not been able to lift a pen. My constitution and frame were, *ab origine*, blasted with a deep, incurable taint of hypochondria, which poisons my existence . . . my feelings at times could only be envied by a reprobate spirit listening to the sentence that dooms it to perdition.' It was at this time, shaken and embittered as he was, that he twice betrayed himself in a way

that he would not have done had he not been broken in health. He was morbidly sensitive, and was no doubt easily affected by stimulants. On December 5, 1793, he wrote to Captain Robertson apologising for a supposed impertinence, which was nothing of the kind, and saying he was 'heated with wine,' and a fortnight later he proposed at a dinner an imprudent toast, at which a fire-eating officer took offence. So that next day, in a piteous letter, he had to beseech the intercession of Mr. Samuel Clarke lest it should be reported to his official superiors and involve his dismissal. Most deplorable of all, at the New Year, came the fracas in the drawing-room at Woodley Park, when, one of a group of revellers, he behaved with unpardonable rudeness to his hostess, Mrs. Riddel, who had been the goddess of his idolatry. That his health was wretched through the first half of 1794 may be inferred from the fact that he produced nothing but a sonnet on the death of Glenriddel, and gave up his correspondence with Thomson, which had been a source of much gratification to him. The cruel and unworthy lampoons on Mrs. Riddel that he perpetrated at

this time, written not in his wine-cups but in cold blood, are a proof that he was an invalid and no longer fully master of himself, but the victim of what he has himself called 'ruffian feelings.' It is impossible to conceive that Burns, generous and compassionate and chivalrous as he was, would have condescended to such ribaldry had he been in sound health. It was on a fine summer evening in this year that Mr. M'Culloch of Ardwell saw him walking alone on the shady side of the principal street of Dumfries, while the gay groups on the opposite side assembled for a county ball, appeared unwilling to recognise him, and when in reply to Mr. M'Culloch's salutation, he quoted Lady Grizel Baillie's pathetic ballad, descriptive of a broken man, and ending with the line :

And were na my heart light, I wad die.

Currie, who must have again got his information from Dr. Maxwell, has it that it was a year before Burns' death that his health began to give way. 'There was an evident decline of his personal appearance, and although his appetite continued unimpaired, he was himself

conscious that his constitution was sinking.' Chambers, with more discernment, dates the loss of health a year earlier: 'It appears that the vigour of his constitution was now beginning, at thirty-five, to give way,' adding, of course echoing Currie, 'under the effects of his generally imprudent course of life.'

In June 1794 Burns wrote to Mrs. Dunlop from an inn in Castle Douglas when on one of his official rounds: 'To tell you that I have been in poor health will not be excuse enough [for not writing], though it is true. I am afraid that I am about to suffer for the follies of my youth. My medical friends threaten me with a flying gout.' But his medical friends threatened him inadvisedly, as he never showed a sign of even poor man's gout.

During the autumn of 1794 Burns had one of those rallies that not infrequently take place even in advanced heart disease. The summer evenings were less favourable to convivial meetings than those of winter; he had been resting a good deal on the green banks of the Nith, and his spirits rose as his circulation improved, and he embarked again on delightful song-writing.

Throughout the winter of 1794 and the greater part of 1795 Burns went on faithfully performing his duties, dining with his friends, occasionally enriching Thomson with gems of song, and carrying on a voluminous correspondence; but his health, it must be believed, was slowly deteriorating all the time, and was further prejudiced by a painful shock he sustained in September, when his little daughter Elizabeth Riddel, three years old, died at Mauchline, where she had been sent for change of air. His parental feelings were always particularly strong, and the death of this much-loved child wounded him sorely, more especially as he was not with her when she passed away and could not attend her funeral. In October 1795 a crisis was reached: from October to the January following, says Currie, 'an accidental complaint confined him to the house.' The terms used were unfortunate, and have been made the pretext of a vile and groundless insinuation, and are wholly misleading, for it was no accidental complaint that held Burns fast in bed for four months, but an exacerbation of a malady of at least twenty years' duration. It was rheumatic fever that

he suffered from, as he has himself told us, and that must have placed his life in jeopardy, still further damaged the already crippled heart, and left him greatly enfeebled. There can be no doubt about it. On December 29, 1795, he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop: 'What a transient business is life. Very lately I was a boy; but t'other day I was a young man; and I already begin to feel the rigid fibre and stiffening joints of old age coming fast o'er my frame.' On January 20, 1796, he wrote to Mrs. Riddel, who had forgiven him: 'The health you wished me in your morning's card is, I think, flown from me for ever. I have not been able to leave my bed to-day till about an hour ago.' On January 31 he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop: 'I have lately drunk deep of the cup of affliction. The autumn robbed me of my only daughter and darling child, and that at a distance too and so rapidly as to put it out of my power to pay the last duties to her. I had scarcely begun to recover from that shock, when I became myself the victim of a most severe rheumatic fever, and long the die spun doubtful, until after many weeks of a sick-bed I am beginning to crawl across my room, and

once indeed have been before my own door in the street.'

When in February 1796 Burns was able to drag himself about again, he went one evening to his old howff, the Globe Inn, and found some of his old friends there, and sadly must the poor man have wanted change and good cheer, after four months' seclusion in the stuffy little bedroom in the humble house in the Mill Vennel. 'He dined at a tavern,' says Currie, 'and returned home at three in the morning, benumbed and intoxicated. This was followed by an attack of rheumatism which confined him to bed for a week. . . .'—a wholly inaccurate narration, no doubt derived from that very haphazard practitioner, Dr. Maxwell. The more detailed account of this incident, preserved by tradition in Dumfries, and everywhere accepted as authentic, is that on leaving a jovial party in the Globe Inn he was, on reaching the door, overpowered by the effects of the liquor he had drunk, fell to the ground, which was covered with snow, and lay there asleep for some hours. Under these circumstances, being reduced by the action of strong medicine prescribed by Dr. Maxwell, a fatal

chill penetrated his bones, and fostered the seeds of rheumatism already in possession of his debilitated body. The whole thing is perhaps a myth, but if he did fall on leaving the Globe Inn, the probability is, not that he was overpowered by the drink he had taken, but that he fainted from heart failure. From a sudden syncope he would recover in a little, but alcoholic coma on a bed of snow must have ended in death. Mrs. Burns, the best and most straightforward of witnesses, testified, as we have seen, that he never came home in an incapable state; and in recalling the details of his last illness, she is not likely to have forgotten so striking a circumstance as his midnight arrival in a half-frozen state after a fall.

This is certain, however, that in February 1796 Burns had a relapse and a severe repercussion of rheumatic fever; and after this his life ebbed slowly away. How long he was confined to bed we do not know, but his own version of this illness, written in July, was: 'In these eight or nine months I have been ailing, sometimes bed-fast, sometimes not. For the last three months I have been tortured with an excruciating rheumatism which has

reduced me to nearly the last stage. Pale, emaciated, so feeble as occasionally to need help from my chair, my spirits fled! fled!' It was while a prisoner in bed and suffering acute pain, that he wrote playfully to Colonel de Peyster, the Commander of the Volunteer Corps he had joined, who had sent to make kind inquiries about him :

My honoured Colonel, deep I feel
 Your interest in the Poet's weal :
 Ah ! now sma' heart hae I to speel
 The steep Parnassus,
 Surrounded thus by bolus-pill
 And potion glasses.

' His appetite,' says Currie, ' now began to fail, his hand shook, and his voice faltered on any exertion or emotion. His pulse became weaker and more rapid, and pain in the larger joints and hands and feet deprived him of the enjoyment of refreshing sleep.' But his unconquerable spirit made light of his infirmities. He must have left his bed far too soon—at a time when rest was above all things necessary for him, for in the month of March the neighbours sometimes saw him out of doors leaning on his staff, seeking the sunshine and a glimpse of the blue sky. In this month Miss Grace

Aiken, the daughter of an old Ayrshire friend, on a visit to Dumfries, passed on the street a tall, gaunt, slovenly looking man of sickly aspect, who proved to be Burns. He was so changed from his former self, that she could hardly have recognised him, except for the sound of his voice in addressing her. On April 14 (where was his medical adviser?) he actually attended a meeting of his Masonic Lodge.

Burns had been led to hope that with the return of spring weather his health would be restored, but lost heart as April went on without any alleviation of his sufferings. At the end of that month he wrote to Thomson: 'Alas! my dear Thomson, I fear it will be some time ere I tune my lyre again! "By Babel streams I have sat and wept"' almost ever since I wrote 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.' On June 4 he tells Mrs. Riddel, 'I am in such miserable health as to be utterly incapable of

showing my loyalty in any way. Racked as I am with rheumatisms, I meet every face with a greeting like that of Balak to Balaam, "Come, curse me, Jacob; and come, defy me, Israel!" So say I—Come, curse me that east wind; and come, defy me the north!' On the 26th of the month he wrote to Mr. James Clarke, 'Still, still the victim of affliction! Were you to see the emaciated figure who now holds the pen to you, you would not know your old friend. Whether I shall ever get about again is only known to Him, the Great Unknown, whose creature I am. Alas, Clarke! I begin to fear the worst. As to my individual self, I am tranquil, and would despise myself if I were not; but Burns' poor widow and half a dozen of his dear little ones—helpless orphans!—there I am weak as a woman's tear. Enough of this! 'tis half of my disease!'

It was now that this sadly stricken man, obviously in the last stage of a mortal malady, for whom absolute repose was essential and any exertion dangerous, was recommended to try sea-bathing and exercise on horseback at the Brow-Well. Whatever his misgiving may have been, he assented to this forlorn hope,

and on July 4 he went there alone. On the day of his leaving home he said to his wife that he thought he was dying, adding in a prophetic flash: 'Don't be afraid; I'll be more respected a hundred years after I am dead, than I am at present.' His cure at the Brow-Well has been already delineated. Mrs. Riddel when he arrived there saw 'the stamp of death on his features,' and on his home-coming on July 18 his wife saw that his life was measured by hours. He came home in a small spring cart, and when he alighted could not stand. 'His looks were hollow and ghastly, a tremor pervaded his whole frame, his tongue was parched,' and yet, brave, heroic man! he that day penned the letter to his father-in-law, begging succour for his wife in her hour of trial. He went to bed and sank into a muttering delirium when not roused by conversation. 'On the third night before he died,' Mrs. Burns told Mr. M'Diarmid, 'I missed him from bed, and found him sitting in the corner of the room with the bedclothes about him. I got assistance and he suffered himself to be quietly led back to bed.' Early on the 21st he sank into a deep delirium, and it was evident that the

end was near. The mode of death that day was characteristic of endocarditis. 'His attendant put a cordial to his lips; he swallowed it, raised himself almost wholly up, spread out his hands, sprang forward nigh the whole length of the bed, fell on his face and expired.' The poor long-suffering heart had ceased its strife.

It will not, I think, be disputed that Burns died of rheumatic endocarditis, with the origin of which alcohol had nothing to do; nor will it be denied, that if he had had the advantage of the guidance which modern medical science and practice afford in cardiac disease, his life might have been freed from many disquietudes and considerably prolonged. He and his fair fame were to a large extent the victims of a faulty medical diagnosis, and it is the consequent incomprehension of his real state and sufferings that has permitted the harsh and unjust judgment so generally passed on him. The most maligned of poets, he has been held up to obloquy as a confirmed drunkard, when all the time he was truly a painful example of the neglect of rheumatism in early life. It was his own ardent spirit, not ardent

spirits, that, as Syme said, 'burnt him to a cinder.'

Reviewing his history, the wonder is that he struggled on and survived as long as he did. It was his splendid constitution that upheld him. He was, as genius ever is, a mutation, but he had vigorous forebears, and derived from his mother, red-haired, dark-eyed, square-browed, quick-tempered, and his father, tall, thin and swarthy, the temperament that sustained him through diverse vicissitudes, and that found expression in his unique personality—of which Maria Riddel has given us a sketch almost better than Nasmyth's portrait: 'His form was manly, his action energy itself. . . . His figure certainly bore the authentic impress of his birth and original station in life : it seemed rather moulded by Nature for the rough exercises of agriculture than the gentler cultivation of the *belles lettres*. His features were stamped with the hardy character of independence and the firmness of conscious though not arrogant pre-eminence . . . the animated expressions of his countenance were almost peculiar to himself. The rapid lightings of his eyes were always the harbingers of some

flash of genius, whether they darted the fiery glances of insulted and indignant superiority, or beamed with the impassioned sentiment of fervent and impetuous affections. His voice alone could improve upon the magic of his eye; sonorous, replete with modulations, it alternately captivated the ear with the melody of poetic numbers and perspicuity of nervous reasoning, or the ardent sallies of enthusiastic patriotism.'

Burns was five feet ten inches in height, of a form that betokened agility as well as strength. His lofty forehead, shaded with dark, curling hair, indicated intellectual capacity. 'His eyes were large, dark, full of ardour and intelligence. His nose was well formed and his countenance uncommonly interesting and expressive.' His demeanour was simple, manly, and dignified. Mr. George Combe, from his study of his skull, of the portrait and descriptions of him, arrived at the conclusion that he was of mixed bilious and nervous temperament, which is equivalent to the rheumatic diathesis. His head was in size much above the Scottish average, and well proportioned and balanced. The phrenological verdict is

confirmed on re-examination of the cast of the skull by the most modern anatomical methods. Sir Arthur Keith says the poet had a head and brain of unusual mass. The skull had a length nearly half an inch more than the average and was very high. Burns had a massive brain, measuring more than that of the average Scotsman, more than that of Robert Bruce, more than that of Sir Thomas Browne, more than that of Dean Swift. His brain volume means that he was a man of power, activity and susceptibility, who must have walked the earth with a consciousness of his superiority over those amongst whom his lot was cast.

Burns was not only the greatest poet, but the best-brained man that Scotland has ever produced, capable of eminence in any walk of life. Professor Dugald Stewart, by personal observation, and by his own gifts specially entitled to form an opinion, perceived this. 'All the faculties of Burns' mind,' he said, 'were as far as I could judge equally vigorous, and his predilection for poetry was rather the result of his own enthusiastic and impassioned temper, than of a genius exclusively adapted to that species of composition. From his con-

versation I should have pronounced him to be fitted to excel in whatever walk of ambition he had chosen to exert his abilities.' He was colossal, great, as Carlyle remarked, in his weakness as well as in his strength. 'His emotional nature,' said Chambers, 'was Titanic like his intellectual.' In conversation his brilliant and expansive versatility shone forth. The Duchess of Gordon said that no man's conversation ever carried her so completely off her feet as that of Burns; and an English lady, familiarly acquainted with some of the most distinguished characters of her time, declared that in the happiest of his social hours there was a charm about Burns she had never seen equalled.

All Burns' biographers agree that it was fitting that he died when he did, because they believe, as Henley put it, that he had 'drunk his life to the lees.' Carlyle thought so. 'Destiny,' he said, 'for so in our ignorance we must speak—his faults, the faults of others, proved too much for him, and that spirit which might have soared could it but have walked, soon sank in the dust, its glorious faculties trodden underfoot in the blossom.' 'It was well,' said Lord Rosebery, 'that he died when he did.'

The accepted belief is that he had exhausted his poetic gifts, that the crop had been gathered in and only the stubble remained, or perhaps a few scattered grains that might still have been gleaned. It is always affirmed that Robert Fergusson's death at twenty-four inflicted a great loss on Scottish literature, but it is assumed that Burns' death at thirty-seven involved no sacrifice, as he had delivered his message, and had no further speech or music in him.

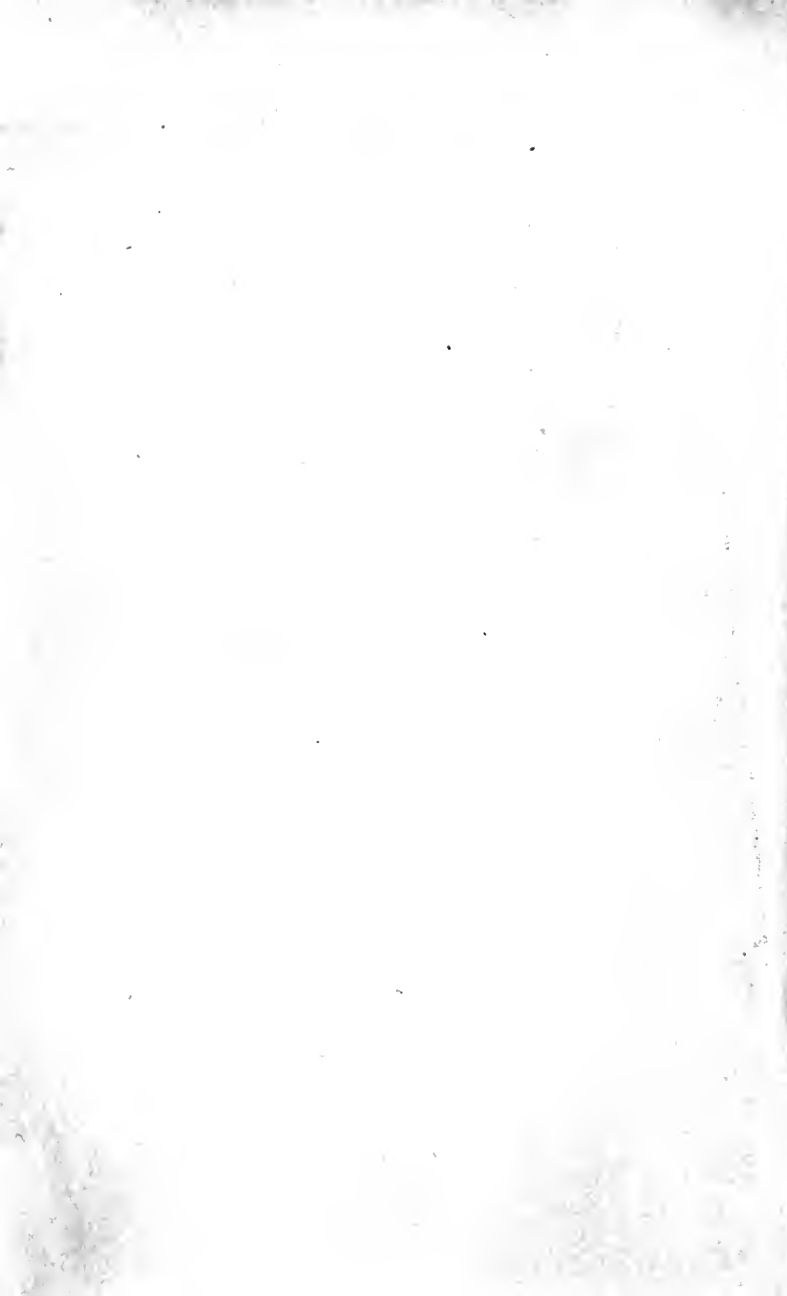
But all this is founded on a misinterpretation of the cause of Burns' death. If he drank himself to death, of course he was done. The fine texture of his brain, sodden and frayed, could respond no more to his poetic conceptions. But as he did not die of drink, and as his brain remained to the last intact and sound in all its functions, there is every reason to believe that had his fell malady been controlled and his life prolonged, he would have continued unhaltingly on his tuneful career. The probability is that he had not reached his zenith, and that had he lived under more favourable conditions than he had ever enjoyed, he might have given us songs and poems

better than before, and even a Scottish drama virile as 'The Jolly Beggars.' I agree with David Wilson that Burns was growing better and better, till he sickened and died. The flame of his genius flickered low at times, but it was still there and capable of lambent ascension. Ten days before his death he composed 'By the Banks of Devon Water'; not one of his finest effusions, but a tiny rill unmistakably from the sacred fountain from which gushed forth 'O' a' the airts' and 'O wert thou in the cauld blast.' His intellect was undimmed till he entered the cloud of death, his broad sympathies and tender emotions were vivid as ever on the very doorstep of eternity.

No poet ever lived a life as arduous and thorny as did Burns. He had to earn his living and that of his family. From *res angusta domi* he was never free. It was only on loiterings by the wayside that he could toy with the Muse, and yet he gathered a goodly garland. He had what was practically six months' holiday at Mossgiel, leaving the management of the farm to Gilbert, and that was his most prolific and potential time. He took one whole day off at Ellisland, and we have 'Tam o' Shanter.'

Had he been able to live the life poetical, as Byron and Shelley and Wordsworth and Keats and Tennyson and Browning and Swinburne did, what might he not have achieved? Burdened and harassed as he was, he did nobly. He was not unspotted from the world. What poet ever was? But he has been, as I have tried to show in some respects, sadly misunderstood and vilified for faults which were fatalities.





PR
4331
C74

Crichton-Browne, (Sir, James
Burns from a new point of
view



PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY
