

IMMORTAL MEMORY, Portmoak Woodland Group, John Purser © January 23rd 2016.

A Nation is Forged in the Hearth of Poetry. Some years back I was commissioned to write a text for the façade of a new corner block of flats in Edinburgh's Canongate. There are many such inscriptions in the High Street of the sort you find in Psalm 127.

Except the Lord bless the house, they labour in vain that build it.

My text was to be in hand-forged steel letters made by John Creed and mounted on an exposed steel beam, going round the corner into Crichton's close that leads to the Scottish Poetry Library. So I settled on A Nation Is Forged in the Hearth of Poetry. The "of Poetry" bit was on the section of steel beam in Crichton's Close. In Scotland poets are makkars. Writing poetry is smith-work. Hammering words and the sounds of words into shape.

I was nervous about my tiny bit of text finding such permanence, so I rang up Ian Hamilton-Finlay, whose gnomic utterances, and miniature perfections are unsurpassed in poetry, and asked him whether it would do. "A Nation Is Forged in the Hearth of Poetry", I said rather querulously. And what he said was "It sounds like something Burns might have written". That was good enough for me.

A nation is something we make ourselves - and this evening we are doing just that, in the name of a poet whose work I have had the honour to celebrate on many occasions, from Reykjavik to Rotorua and to the discomfort of Dave on the BBC.

Immortal Memories are a bit of a testing ground – but I have been well tested and am past worrying now, ever since I lectured in a geriatric hospital near Bridge of Weir. I was lecturing on Schubert lollypops and my audience of a dozen was wheeled into a "gymnasium" at 80 Fahrenheit, half of them asleep, all with colostomy bags. The atmosphere was thick and two more rapidly fell asleep. That left four actually awake, of whom two old ladies appreciated my efforts. The other two were gentlemen one of whom, two-thirds of the way through my presentation, turned to his neighbour and, in a wonderful broad Scots stage whisper asked "Was I born to suffer this?"

All thoughts of Schubert, poetry and beauty were instantly replaced by murderous longings, but it is not done to murder people in their wheel chairs. So back to my subject: A Nation Is Forged in the Hearth of Poetry. W.B.Yeats sought to forge a nation in poetry and politics, and he frequently refers to Burns's work as to some kind of touchstone. Unlike Yeats, Burns was, of course, fluent in two languages – Scots and English - and he was an amateur musician, able to read the treble clef, play the fiddle, sing (albeit with a rough voice) and, of course, he was a consummate lyricist, often reworking traditional material.

One may huff and puff about the quality of lyric verse: the Germans are harsh about Müller's qualities as a lyric poet – harsh, that is, until they hear him sung in Schubert's settings, of which Müller (alas) had no knowledge. The literary critic may shrink a little at Burns's "warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee", but the words sing well and *Ae Fond Kiss* is a great song no matter which of the two favourite tunes to which it is sung is used.

Whether Yeats classed Burns as a "peasant" I can't say - "peasant" was a word which he used freely; but in preferring Burns's *Elegy on Capt. Matthew Henderson*, to Shelley's *Adonais*

Yeats was preferring a style derived equally from the “vernacular” and the more “elevated” tone of a Shelley (for want of better words). To make his point, Yeats quotes Burns:

Go to your sculptured tombs, ye Great,
In a' the tinsel trash o' state!

This is as poetically and socially sharp as anything Shelley wrote and anything Yeats was to write. I think Yeats was almost jealous of Burns, as he implies here:

I remember when I was twenty years old, arguing . . . that Ireland . . . could never create a democratic poet of the type of Burns, although it had tried to do so more than once, but that its genius would in the long run be aristocratic and lonely.

Was Yeats thinking of himself as that potential genius? He continues:

Whenever I had known some old countryman, I had heard stories and sayings that arose out of an imagination, that would have understood Homer better than ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’ or ‘Highland Mary’, because it was an ancient imagination . . .

This isn’t convincing to anyone brought up in the tradition of Gavin Douglas’s translation of the *Enead* into Scots, but it reveals Yeats’s need to claim a piece of high literary ground for Ireland at a popular level, and in that he was undoubtedly justified, for my parents well remember the town crier in Dingle in Co. Kerry announcing a Gate Theatre performance in the town that night:

Come to tonight’s dramatic entertainment! Famous play by Sophocles! Oedipus the Wreck!

This renders the entire Theban trilogy redundant. Oedipus the Wreck. Everything else is self-indulgent rhetorical padding. In many respects, Burns had confronted the rhetorical problems that Yeats faced in his search for “a common speech”. It was not a wish to deny the rights of one or another mode of address so much as a desire for the freedom and ability to make use of variety. That same Elegy for Matthew Henderson makes use of many of the conventions of high register poetry, but Burns infuses it with his intimate knowledge of nature. This is a kind of companion piece to that great song *Now Westlin’ Winds*, eminently suited to the Portmoak Woodland Group. Here are four verses from it:

Mourn, little harebells o’er the lea;
 Ye stately foxgloves fair to see;
 Ye woodbines hanging bonnilie,
 In scented bowers;
 Ye roses on yon thorny tree,
 The first ‘o flowers.

Mourn, ye wee songster o’ the wood;
 Ye grouss that crap the heather bud;
 Ye curlews calling thro’ a clud;
 Ye whistling plover;
 And mourn, ye whirring paitrick brood;
 He’s gane for ever!

Mourn, sooty coots, and speckled teals;
 Ye fisher herons, watching eels;
 Ye duck and drake, wi' airy wheels
 Circling the lake:
 Ye bitterns, till the quagmire reels,
 Rair for his sake.

Mourn, clamouring craiks at close o' day,
 'Mang fields o' flowering claver gay;
 And when ye wing your annual way
 Frae our cauld shore,
 Tell thae far warlds, wha lies in clay,
 Wham we deplore.

Yeats clearly envied Burns's ability to step across the boundaries in the assertion of his national culture. However, his brother Jack attempted something closer to Burns, but in paintings, prose and drama. He wrote this in one of his novels:

Where there is Romance there is the grain, the seed of the charlock bui, the wild gold weed of a free sovereign people growing. It was in Mother Eve's Garden and when the snake came sliding in he circled it. He knew his match, my friend.

I stole from that for a poem I wrote for Scotia Nova. The poem is called *Scotland's Thistle* and you can read it in my *There Is No Night - New and Selected Poems*, available from Kennedy & Boyd, or in *Scotia Nova – Poems for the early days of a better Nation* from Luath Press. It sees the belligerent beauty of the thistle's spikes as protection for the soft thistle-down that will float

. on liberating winds,
 to spread the urgent seed
 like a free sovereign people growing.

A Nation Is Forged in the Hearth of Poetry. In wishing to assert our cultural rights I am following not only in the steps of Burns and Yeats, but also Scott.

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
 Who never to himself hath said,
 This is my own, my native land!
 Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd,
 As home his footsteps he hath turn'd,
 From wandering on a foreign strand!
 If such there breathe, go, mark him well;
 For him no Minstrel raptures swell;

O Caledonia! stern and wild,
 Meet nurse for a poetic child!
 Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,
 Land of the mountain and the flood . . .

I remember a day with Malcolm Slessor and Jane King on Blaven, a magnificent mountain near my home on Skye. We were all three badly hung-over and the day was grim. Low cloud, steady drizzle and no prospect of improvement. By the time we had reached the first corrie, Malcolm turned to me and said "It's not getting any better is it?" "No." I replied. "What do you say we turn back?" says Malcom. Malcolm wrote the Scottish Mountaineering Club official guide to Blaven and I thought this was a poor show. I swept my arm towards the swollen river and swirling mists and intoned:

O Caledonia! stern and wild,
 Meet nurse for a poetic child!
 Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,
 Land of the mountain and the flood . . . We're bloody going up!

And indeed that appeal to our culture took us up the mountain and cured the hangovers. Robert Burns was a great preserver of his nation's culture, - but not only through his own creative work as a poet; but as a collector of traditional folksong - both music and words. He was in fact one of the greatest early collectors in the field, working to high standards of scholarship for the time, writing down everything he knew about the material he collected, drawing from every kind of source, printed, manuscript and oral, and erecting a monument with the publisher James Johnson, which they rightly and proudly published as *The Scots Musical Museum*. Here is Burns writing to Johnson:

Perhaps you may not find your account, lucratively, in this business; but you are a Patriot for the Music of your Country; and I am certain Posterity will look on themselves as highly indebted to your Publick spirit. - Be not in a hurry; let us go on correctly; and your name shall be immortal.

Burns was also able to contribute to the national identity with narrative verse – something which Yeats never managed and which seems to have ebbed away from poets in general. It is the oldest and greatest poetic tradition, and Burns contributed to it with distinction, almost exclusively in Scots in poems such as *Tam O' Shanter*, *Death and Doctor Hornbrooke*, and *The Twa Dogs*.

I am going, however to read the last few stanzas of a modern narrative poem, by Paddy Bushe. Paddy has translated Sorley MacLean's works from Scottish to Irish Gaelic, and he wrote this poem after I'd told him of one of my visits to Sorley MacLean. I used to walk through the Cuillin some 20 miles to where Jim Green of Aquila Press was readying my poetry for publication, and I would stop off at Sorley's for a break and a dram. He wanted to know exactly where I had been and took out an old Scottish Mountaineering Club map and we knelt down in front of it while Sorley cooed out the names like a pigeon to its mate. This is the story that Paddy translated to somewhere between Skye and Japan, somewhere between the 8th and 20th-centuries. His poem is about to be published by Dedalus Press in his latest collection *on a turning wing*. I strongly recommend it. He writes poetry of great beauty and this poem is no exception. It is called *The Music Master and the Poet*, and he has kindly allowed me to reproduce the last two stanzas here describing the two men rejoicing in their shared memories:

Then all at once the music master's fingers
 Walked the map alone. His friend's raised hand

Triangulated the air like the hand of a conductor,

And the poet, who had said he had no music,
Was chanting his way right across the island,
Head lifted, eyes closed, in a canticle of love.

Well there you are. A canticle of love. That is what the Immortal Memory is about. And here is Burns in the lyrics of *O Were I On Parnassus' Hill*, turning the rhetoric of the Greeks upside down and equalling Yeats in the beautiful musicality of his verses:

O were I on Parnassus Hill;
Or had o' Helicon my fill;
That I might catch poetic skill,
 To sing how dear I love thee.
But Nith maun be my Muses well,
My Muse maun be thy bonie sell;
On Corsincon I'll glow'r and spell,
 And write how dear I love thee.

Then come, sweet Muse, inspire my lay!
For a' the lee-lang simmer's day,
I couldna sing, I couldna say,
 How much, how dear, I love thee.
I see thee dancing o'er the green,
Thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean,
Thy tempting lips, thy roguish een –
 By Heaven and Earth I love thee.

By night, by day, a-field, at hame,
The thoughts o' thee my breast inflame;
And ay I muse and sing thy name,
 I only live to love thee.
Tho' I were doom'd to wander on,
Beyond the sea, beyond the sun,
Till my last, weary sand was run;
 Till then – and then I love thee.

That last line seems to reach beyond death: “Till then – and then”. There is an old Gaelic saying:

Thig crìoch air an t-saoghal
Ach mairidh gaol is ceòl.

The world will come to an end
But love and music will endure.

And in the works of Robert Burns they surely do – beyond the sea, beyond the sun. And if we are to make of this nation of ours a home for love and music, we will have no better example to follow than that of the man whose memory we honour this evening. I therefore ask you to be upstanding and raise your glasses to The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.