

Immortal Memory

By Peter Mallett

*A guid New-year I wish thee, Maggie!
Hae, there's a rip to thy auld baggie:
Tho' thou's howe-backit, now, an' knaggie,
I've seen the day
Thou could hae gaen like onie staggie
Out-owre the lay.*

"Sir, we can't understand it; that's not proper English!"

The same complaint every year. I always give the fifth form this poem at the end of January. Burns' birthday. A good time to remember the past as well as look forward to what the future may bring. Some of the fathers of the current bunch studied Burns with me in this same room. Their initials are probably carved on the rows of wooden desks arrayed before me, memorials to an earlier era. Nothing much has changed in the thirty years I've been teaching here: Hawkeswood Hall doesn't believe in modernization. I sometimes feel as though I've awoken to find myself in a shabbier version of the room I went to sleep in decades before. Only the pupils' hairstyles have changed – and their infringements of the uniform rules. White socks are the current fad.

"As Blackstone has informed us: it's not 'proper English'. So what is it?" I look hopefully along the rows of adolescents slouched over their desks in that bored 'whatever' attitude teenage boys have. "Andrews?"

"Dialect, sir?"

"Good. Any guesses which dialect?"

This elicits a better response. I choose a hand at the back of the class.

"Scottish?"

"That's right. Lowland Scots. And which poet wrote in Lowland Scots, Chapman?"

"Robert Burns."

"Well done. So what's it about? Who's Maggie?"

"Is she his girlfriend, Sir?"

"No, Mullers."

"Not his girlfriend, Mullers, you dumbo; his wife. Look, he calls her an old bag!"

"Thank you, Rawthorne. Any advances on 'wife'?"

Blank stares all round.

“Look at the title: *The Auld Farmer’s New Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare, Maggie.*”

“It’s a horse! Maggie’s a horse.”

“That’s right, Browning.”

There’s a mini-conference in the third row. “But what’s ‘howe-backit’ and ‘knaggie’, Mr Johnson?”

“Maggie’s old now and misshapen – hollow-backed and knobby.”

Sniggers.

I know what they’re thinking. The arrogance of youth – old age is the preserve of their grandparents, even their parents. Nothing to do with them.

*O life! How pleasant, in thy morning,
Young Fancy’s rays the hills adorning!*

But I was no different at their age. I also imagined my days stretching into a limitless future where senility did not exist. If only they knew how quickly their time will pass! My skin was once soft and supple like theirs, my hair – not much of it remaining – jet black and thick. My arms, now *knaggie*, once bowled for the school cricket team. Unthinkable to these teenagers, I, like Burns, once experienced romance and passion.

“Is it a metaphor, sir?”

Thank God for one bright spark. There’s one in every class, someone to make this job worthwhile. “Go on, Potts.”

“The poem seems to be about an old horse. But it’s really about the farmer, isn’t it, and the passing of time?”

“Exactly.” I offer a silent prayer of gratitude that this pupil will carry Burns’ legacy to the next generation. “The farmer’s probably in his fifties. Quite old for the period. Remember: Burns was only 37 when he died.”

I’ve been teaching Burns longer than Burns lived.

“As Potts has pointed out, the poem’s about the human condition. How time passes and we all change – yes, even you, Mullers, you’ll find you’re not immortal. The farmer remembers Maggie as a sleek, grey young mare twenty-nine years before when he was courting his future wife.”

When first I gaed to woo my Jenny.

Dead now six years, my own Jenny. No one teaches you in school that one day you may be on your own; it’s not a natural condition. I’ve always been part of a family. I met Jenny at university; we married soon after graduating. Two children quickly

followed. In forty years of marriage I hardly ever had the house to myself. I never expected I'd be the surviving partner. *Widower*. Possibly the only word in the English language for which the masculine is a suffixed form of the feminine.

*We've worn to crazy years thegither;
We'll toyte about wi' ane anither;*

No one for me to totter about with. Even the dog's gone. They don't live as long as horses, we couldn't grow old together. No point in getting another one now: I'd be 80 before a new puppy was a mangy old dog.

The house is all that remains of a life lived together. Number 46 Elm Drive has aged and frayed with me, a museum of the changing fashions of interior design. The Ercol bentwood furniture we bought when we first married is still serviceable; back in the 50s it was trendy but things were made to last then, not like today's disposable goods. Perhaps there'll be a revival and it'll enjoy new popularity as a retro-look. The bathroom was renovated in the 70s – pink suite; the kitchen in the early 80s – orange tiles and pine dresser. Nothing much since. The house will see me through.

"Sir?"

"Sir!!"

* * * * *

"Eddie?"

I sometimes wonder whom she's addressing. No one ever called me Eddie before. As a schoolboy, I was 'Edward', as an adult 'Mr Johnson' – at the least. Mostly 'sir'. Funny how respect decreases in proportion to your age in this country. In some cultures, the old are valued.

"Been sleeping again, have we?"

Well, I have – not much else to do in this place. I can't vouch for Mrs Bullock (no first names allowed there, note), chief cook and bedpan emptier. She hasn't yet realized the two activities are not unconnected: if her cooking were better, the bedpans would need emptying less often.

"It's time for our medicine."

I'm not sure when Mrs Bullock assumed joint ownership of my prescription. "I think I'll give it a miss today. You have it for me, Mrs Bullock."

"Oh, you're in good form today, aren't you, Eddie? Well, don't play around, it's nearly time for our bath."

Since when did Mrs Bullock get to share the tub with me? I haven't been bathed by anyone since my mother scrubbed me at the age of seven. Shakespeare was

right: *Last scene of all that ends this strange eventful history is second childishness. I graduated from Shakespeare's sixth age – the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, with spectacles on nose and pouch on side – as soon as they brought me in here. It won't be long now till mere oblivion follows.*

"Now come along. I'll park you here next to Mrs McCleod so you can watch *Eastenders* together. Aileen, this is Mr Johnson. I think you'll have a lot in common. Eddie's quite a reader. Used to be a teacher, I heard."

Why does she talk about me as though I'm not here? Just because I'm old, doesn't mean I can't hear. Does not mean I'm stupid.

"You're the new inmate, aren't you, Mrs McCleod?"

"Resident, Eddie. Resident."

"Yes, Mrs Bullock. Resident."

"I'll leave you two to get acquainted."

"Is that Burns, you're reading, Mr Johnson?"

"That's right, Mrs McCleod. Do you like Burns?"

"Yes indeed, Mr Johnson. Today's his birthday, too."

"Twenty-fifth of January, so it is! Not that Mrs Bullock thinks fit to honour the occasion. Though I wouldn't fancy my chances with her haggis."

"Definitely a risk not worth taking. I'm sure the combination of Mrs Bullock's cooking and non-stop *Eastenders* is going to finish me off one day."

"What was your crime then, Mrs McCleod?"

"Corruption of the Waterworks Department. Petty Piddling of Noxious Liquids. And yours?"

"Breaking and Entering."

"Breaking and Entering?"

"Yes, broke my hip and entered the County General Hospital. No-one to look after me when I was released."

"No children?"

"My son's working abroad; my daughter's in the west country. Job, family: no time to look after an invalid. How about you, Mrs McCleod?"

"Daughter, only child. Chief witness, prosecutor and judge in the case. Did they give you a life sentence too?"

"Seems more like a death sentence."

“When ance life’s day draws near the gloamin, Then fareweel vacant, careless roamin.”

“Burns. He knew what he was talking about, Mrs McCleod.”

“He did indeed. The whole of human experience compressed into thirty seven short years. Well, why don’t we have our own little celebration of the Bard? Will you take a wee dram with me to toast the Immortal Memory? I happen to have a stash of miniature malt samples secreted away.”

“Strictly against the rules, Mrs McCleod.”

“Exactly. And all the tastier for it.”

“Leeze me on thee, John Barleycorn, Thou king of grain!”

“You know, Mr Johnson, I think you and I are going to get on very well together. Come and park your wheelchair over in my room!”

“Are you making improper suggestions, Mrs McCleod?”

“Absolutely, Mr Johnson. Let’s age disgracefully together!”

(1478 words)

Extracts from *The Auld Farmer’s New-Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare, Maggie; Scotch Drink; and Epistle to James Smith* from the *Complete Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, Lomond Books, Glasgow (2000)

Quotation from *As You Like It* (Act II, scene vii) by William Shakespeare: *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Book Club Associates by arrangement with OUP (1981)