

Brothers Be For A' That

By Robin Jenkins

Dad is no problem. He might be in his late eighties and he has definitely slowed down but that twisted old mind is still alert, always ready for some devilment. We are lucky. He's kept all of his faculties, takes care of his appearance and walks like a Guardsman, to the delight of the little old ladies in his neighbourhood. He's so proud and independent that he'll never need to go to a home or accept assistance. I worry though that he would suffer proudly than let any pains show. Nevertheless I've never seen him without that welcoming smile whenever I drop in.

"You'll have a wee one?" That was no question. Every time I visited I took him a bottle and he wouldn't accept the bottle unless I broke the seal with him, even if it is still ten in the morning. His happiest moments nowadays were either when his friends dropped round for a bit of political debate or when he was ensconced in front of his fire alone with a book, Burns' poetry usually. In either case malt whisky was an essential ingredient to his happiness.

"They've made a big thing of Rabbie this year. 250 years and still he's being remembered. I saw a bit about all the festivities on the telly. They showed a bit from Mauchline, inside Poosie Nancy's. It's hardly changed."

Dad was still a communist. Not a fashionable viewpoint nowadays but still strongly held. He had objected to the War and become a conscientious objector. He had been sentenced to hard labour with a work gang in the wilds and moors of East Ayrshire to dig drainage and plant trees as punishment. Most of the time he had been held in Mauchline. He had suffered the backbreaking work but the one bright aspect to those hellish years was the knowledge that he was in Burns' Country.

He still sang 'Lee Rigs' or 'Comin' Thro The Rye' at family events. He knew them all. He even used to love to return to Ayrshire and trace Burns' locations. He used to kid me on when I was younger that I needed to get myself down to Ayrshire and find myself an Ayrshire lassie. "The blood of Jean Armour flows on son. The bonniest lassies in the World are Ayrshire lassies. Obliging too." Mum was from Glasgow and would rise to the bait every time. "I'll give you obliging" and they would both have a smile. They had met just after the War and then enjoyed 63 years of marriage together before Mum died.

"I have an awful notion to go down there again son."

"Aye. Well I'm off on Thursday. I'll come, pick you up and we'll make a day of it. Visit your old stomping grounds. They'll probably be harvesting those trees you showed us that you claimed you planted. They'll be over 60 years old now."

Thursday and he was ready and waiting for me. You would think that you would slow down as you get older and rush less but not Dad. If you said 9 o'clock then by 9.01 you were late. Anyway, we set off up through Strathaven and on past Muirkirk. Sure enough some of the woods that he had pointed out in the past were clear felled, much to his annoyance. We stopped a few times to poke around. He directed me down narrow lanes and silently shook his head at a few old ruins.

Presumably people had lived there during the War. His memories were being wiped from the physical World.

The locals' reaction to 'conchies' was black or white. In the towns folk thought that they were scum and cowards and treated them abysmally but this part of Ayrshire, despite its wilderness, was a coal mining area and, in the main, the miners had been welcoming. Many of them had opposed the War too but their jobs were reserved and they could avoid the decision of becoming a 'conchie' simply by carrying on and helping the war effort by hauling coal from deep below these wild moors.

Dad's memories of the War were therefore mixed. He had suffered terrible conditions, lots of abuse and his health had suffered but he had stuck firmly to his beliefs and I was proud of him. "No medals for me but I did my bit" he said, pointing at a hillside of tall trees. "Me and Johnny Anderson planted them. It was right hard work. We dug the trenches by hand. I think it was '41. The snow was so deep that winter that we couldn't get back to Mauchline and we were billeted in a hut on that farm" and he pointed across the hill. "Good people." I had heard the stories before but enjoyed hearing them again.

We drove on down to Mauchline. It might not be the prettiest village but Dad loves the place. It was, of course, the place where Robert Burns met Jean Armour, his long-suffering wife. We had to visit Poesie Nancy's and The Black Bull in Burns' footsteps and then up to the The Club to see if any of his old cronies were still around. I already knew that the club had been built after the War but patiently listened to his explanation once again. "They were good to me here son and the lassies...ach Jean Armour's blood flows on in the Mauchline women."

I stood at the bar and caught the barman's attention. "A half of heavy, a large Macallan and an Irn Bru" and I stopped short. I was looking in a mirror. The barman was my image. A few years older but my very image. He didn't seem to notice though and handed me our drinks without comment.

Dad had settled down in the company of some older members, retired miners I guessed. He could pick out a fellow communist quicker than I could buy the drinks.

"Dad. Look at that barman. Is he no my spitting image?"

At my words an old woman looked at me, looked at the barman and then at Dad. "Rab...It's you...Rab MacKinnon."

Dad peered at her. "Jean. My God. How are you? Look at you. Still got those sparkling blue eyes I see. My bonny Jean. Here, this is Robert, my son" and he turned to me.

Jean laughed then twisted around to call to the barman. "Robert. Come over and meet an old frined of mine."

I was confused but the barman came over. "This is my son. He's Robert too, Rab" and the barman shook Dad's hand. "Pleased to meet you. How do you two know each other?"

I was sitting back taking it all in. He was my double. Older, maybe in his mid sixties, but me all the same. The barman returned to his work. Dad and Jean talked together, ignoring everyone else. They laughed and touched hands. Their snowy white heads bobbed and their eyes sparkled.

Eventually I had no choice but to interrupt. "I'm sorry Dad but we have to go. I've to pick up wee Rabbie tonight."

"Ach Jean. He's right. I've a smashin' wee grandson. His Sunday name is Robert too, Rabbie mostly. Generation after generation all called Robert. No imagination for us MacKinnons." He rose, leant stiffly over and gently kissed her cheek. I'll call. We still have so much to talk about."

Dad was quiet in the car.

"The blood of Jean Armour flows on" I said. "He was my image over the back ya auld rogue."

"I never knew son" he said quietly. "Jean was the bonniest lass. She was good to me."

"Aye so I saw. I wonder how she decided on his name. No imagination at all."

He laughed and began to sing.

"Green grows the rashes, O;

Green grows the rashes, O.

The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,

Are spent among the lasses, O"