



POETRY OF PATRIOTISM

Everybody Knows Macaulay's "Lays"

(From a Centennial Tribute broadcast by 2YA on Friday, May 8)



IF you were to make a choice of the twelve, or the six, best-known passages about patriotism, it is certain, I think, that you would include this:

*Then out spake brave Horatius,
The captain of the Gate:
"To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late,
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers,
And the temples of his Gods?"*

Everybody who knows any verse at all knows that passage. It is household speech. It is from Macaulay's "Horatius," one of his *Lays of Ancient Rome*.

I recall these verses to you to-night because it was a hundred years ago this year that *The Lays of Ancient Rome* were first published. We know the Lays, our fathers knew them, and our grandfathers, and our great-grandfathers. In 1842, Macaulay published the four lays, "Horatius," "The Battle of Lake Regillus," "Virginia," and "The Prophecy of Capys." Their success was immediate. A few years later two other non-Roman lays were added: "Ivry: A Song of the Huguenots," and "The Armada." This is the collection that is known all over the English-speaking world, and has provided so many lines and verses that have passed into the language. In the past hundred years no verse has been more popular.

Trifles to Macaulay

In 1843 Macaulay was forty-two years of age. He had been famous for some years. His essays in the *Edinburgh Review* placed him in the front rank of prose-writers. He was a member of Parliament, and had been Secretary of State for War. He had spent five years in India, where he helped to frame a code of criminal law. But while he had written much, he had published no books. The collected edition of the essays was to come and so was the *History of England*. Indeed, the publication of the essays in book form was hastened by the success of the Lays. Macaulay wrote the *Lays of Ancient Rome* at odd times—some in Italy, some in India. He considered them trifles, and so perhaps they are by comparison with his *History*. He passed them round among his friends before publication, asked for their advice, and what is much more, he took that advice and made alterations.

Are the Lays poetry? Some say they are. Some say they are not. Well, in the city of poetry there are many mansions. The lays are not great poetry, but if they are not poetry, and do not contain real poetry in places, many men and women will be prepared, in the slang phrase, to eat their hats. The Lays are great ballads. They describe action in most lively terms. They are full of action, full of strength, full of stir. One critic makes the interesting point that

the marked taste of intelligent children for Macaulay's poems is not to be undervalued. And that brings me to a most important point. Macaulay's Lays have introduced millions of men and women to poetry, by an easy road. They have laid the foundations for appreciation of greater poetry.

The Past in Action

The virtues of Macaulay's *History of England* are in his Lays. He was not a deep thinker, not a meditative man. His genius lay in painting pictures of the past, and especially the past in action. In this he has never been surpassed, perhaps never equalled. Scene after scene in the Lays illustrates this. He keeps himself to facts and describes these facts in the simplest language. And he chooses the right facts and the right words. Take the advance of the Tuscan army:

*Meanwhile the Tuscan army
Right glorious to behold,
Came flashing back the noonday
light,
Rank behind rank, like surges
bright,
On a broad sea of gold.
Four hundred trumpets sounded
A peal of war-like glee,
As that great host, with measured
tread,
And spears advanced, and ensigns
spread,
Rolled slowly towards the bridge's
head
Where stood the dauntless three.*

And contrast this with the picture of the army when the dauntless three at the bridge have checked it:

*Was none who would be foremost
To lead such dire attack;
But those behind cried "Forward!",
And those before cried "Back!"
And backward now and forward
Wavers the deep array;
And on the tossing sea of steel
To and fro the standards reel;
And the victorious trumpet peal
Dies fitfully away.*

Or take this picture from his description of the gathering of the Tuscan army that marched on Rome. Does it not recall the sort of thing that happened in New Zealand in the last war, and is happening to-day?

*The harvest of Arretium,
This year old men shall reap;
This year young boys in Umbro,
Shall plunge the struggling sheep;
And in the vats of Luna,
This year the must shall foam,
Round the white feet of laughing
girls
Whose sires have marched to Rome.*

"The Battle of Lake Regillus"

"Horatius" is much the best-known of the Lays. In "The Battle of Lake Regillus" the Tarquin family figure again, but the story is not nearly so clear-cut as that of the defence of Rome. The fighting at the bridge is single combat. The fighting at the battle of Lake Regillus is between armies. Few

poets, however, have ever described fighting more vividly:

*But fiercer grew the fighting
Around Valerius dead;
For Titus dragged him by the foot,
And Aulus by the head.
"On Latines, on," quoth Titus,
"See how the rebels fly!"
"Romans, stand firm!" quoth Aulus,
"And win the fight, or die!"*

*Then tenfold round the body
The roar of battle rose,
Like the roar of a burning forest
When a strong north wind blows.
Now backward, and now forward,
Rocked furiously the fray,
Till none could see Valerius,
And none wist where he lay.*

There are many other lines that stay in the mind.

*Up rose the golden morning
Over the Porcian height,
The proud Ides of Quintilis,
Marked evermore with white.*

Many and many a time as I have looked out on a New Zealand morning, with the sun catching a circle of hills, I have repeated this passage. Very simple words they are, but they have a note of magic.

Macaulay had a noble hatred of tyranny; at the sight of wrong he became righteously fierce. This spirit burns like a flame in the Lays, and to-day we go forward in its light:

*"Now by your children's cradles,
Now by your fathers' graves,
Be men to-day, Quirites, or be for
ever slaves."*

* * *

*"And how can men die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his Gods!"*

The V.A.D.'s too...



always
enjoy...

ARDATH

THE CIGARETTES YOU ARE
PROUDER TO SMOKE
—AND TO OFFER



Cork or
Ivory
Tipped