

THE POETS AND ORATORS OF IRELAND.

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ENNObLED solely by their own genius—owing no thanks to the blazonry of the herald's college for worldly titles—descended from no long line of pompous ancestry—about the middle of the eighteenth century a group of intellectual giants burst in a blaze of light upon her soil to gladden Ireland. To offer their greatness our honest tribute, we are clustered together in this room to-night, and although these walls have echoed to the plaudits we have paid to the great dead and the great living, surely to no nobler souls have we rendered homage; and if we seek to marry our praises to their memories, I trust no dissenting voice will forbid the banns. Let me now merely glance at the several divisions of my subject. First, the Poets of Ireland. Where can we find a sweeter harpist than genial, wayward, glorious

TOM MOORE?

a tenderer, nobler soul than that pathetic painter of peasant life, that real lover of nature in all her moods—Oliver Goldsmith? or writers of songs more humorous and touching than Samuel Lover and the jovial Prout? Do you seek for flowering eloquence and flashing wit—for great thoughts that kindle good thoughts in you—for words that burn and dazzle with their brightness—for the very witchery of wit, sparkling and playing about you in many-colored wreaths of flame? Where will you find it in more glorious garb than in the speeches of those very men whose fame we are met to celebrate to-night? Then do you blame me, gentlemen, if I have chosen to ask for that country who was the mother of these illustrious sons some recognition at our hands—who though the pillars of her old greatness may be shaken and the shamrock forget to blossom as of old, though her harp hangs mute upon her walls, though weeds may have withered her gardens, “sand filled up her palaces, and seaweed o’ergrown her walls of revelry,” still stands as that Ireland who gave the world a Moore, a Sheridan, and a Burke?

There is Tom Moore, the bard of bards of old Erin—Tom Moore, who thought in music as men think in prose, whose beating blood was running song. When Moore lit up the literature of Ireland with the torch of his genius, a titled poet arose in England to make his countrymen wonder, too. The two were contemporaries and friends. But the light that played round Moore's verses—tender, glancing, and brilliant—was in no danger of being extinguished even in the sullen glare of Lord Byron's genius. An aurora borealis might as well think of being put out by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius. As planets, they were as different as Mercury and Saturn. If their rising was at the same time, they never moved in the same orb, or met or jostled in the “wide, pathless way” of fancy and invention. The gay and happy idolize the Irishman on his pedestal of airy smiles or transient tears. The severer verse of the Englishman is enshrined in the breast of those whose gaiety has been turned to gall—from whom happiness has fled like a dream. “It seemed,” as some one who knew him and loved him well has told us of Moore, “as if his airy spirit, drawn from the sun, continually fluttered with fond aspiration to regain that native source of light and heat.” His Parnassus is a blooming Eden.

For rare, rollicking, stirring songs and flashing wit, go seek the pages of old Father Prout, who “belonged to a class of mortals now quite gone out of Irish existence like the elk and the wolf-dog.” One of the most serious and most beautiful is the “Bells of Shandon;” as a specimen of melodious versification, it is unequalled. For real fun and heartiest laughter, turn over the pages of the O'Doherty Paper by glorious Father Maginn. But the allusion to Father Prout and Dr. Maginn drifts us into

THE WITS OF IRELAND—

a subject so vast I cannot cope with it; and as I have no intention of entrenching on the rights of the gentlemen who are yet to entertain you, and an account of wit not being much in my line, I will leave that to them for dissection. But how a mere mention of Irish wit brings up before us reminiscences of the good things we have heard or read of Irishmen—recollections that range from the delicate wit of the poet, the scathing wit of the orator, to the wretched torture of some unfortunate word—from the quiet twinkle of the eye to “laughter holding both his sides.” It was Charles James Fox—upon whom our cultivated Governor lectured so admirably the other night—who pronounced Sheridan “the wittiest man he ever met.” Horne Tooke said of Curran's wit, “it was a mine of virgin gold incessantly crumbling away from its own richness.” Then from this unrippled sea of music, verse, and mirth, I come to the majestic, heaving ocean, tossing and foaming in its might, to that realm where the voice of the great orator is lifted up—where

THE POWER OF GODLIKE ELOQUENCE

holds sway. The power of eloquence! Where is the human heart that it hath not brimmed with hope or thrilled with keen delight? Its voice is in the storm and in the lyre; its home the passion-haunted soul of man! It throttles treason in the marble aisles! It unmasks murder in the face of morn! It rends the midnight veil from the torch and knife! It lit the eyes of Patrick Henry when he raised aloft the plumes of liberty which sprang from patriot tears as beauty from the sea foam, and waved them high, till in the crimson front of war they flashed and drooped not till our banded States were free! It found its sovereign in those great men we honor to-night, who held in their voices the keys to human hearts—those colossi among their kind, who so emblazoned their names in the memories of the Irish people that no change, no time, can erase them—those names which glitter in letters of living fire upon Ireland's portals, whose mention still summons, not to Irishmen only, but to the world, visions of victories won in the cause of human rights, visions of the grandest of all victories—the triumph of genius over injustice. Burke, Sheridan, Grattan,

Curran, O'Connell, Shiel, Plunket, and Phillips! What a group of men to gather around one nation and call her mother! Sheridan was a wonder. It was on the third charge against Warren Hastings that he made his most wonderful speech. As high as fifty guineas was offered to obtain a seat to hear him. For five and a half hours he commanded the wonder and admiration of the House. His fellow-members were startled and spell-bound by the clearness of his logic, the flashes of his wit, and the splendors of his rhetoric. That other great Irishman, Burke, declared it to be “the most astounding piece of eloquence, argument, and wit united of which there was any record or tradition.” Fox said “that all he had ever heard, all he had ever read, when compared with it dwindled into nothing, and vanished like vapor before the sun!”

Blazing in beauty like a beacon-light, Burke's eloquence always pointed the way of safety to his countrymen. It was Burke whose orations are full of material for the would-be statesman of to-day. Would to God they would read them! It was Burke who first dared to propose that

THE GALLING YOKE OF SUBJECTION

to the British king should be stricken from American shoulders, and we stand out in God's sunlight free and untrammelled men. By his withering invective, his rhetorical splendors, his vivid painting, his harrowing descriptions of Hastings' crimes in that great trial, he actually so shattered the frame and palsied the strength of the accused that he was entirely overwhelmed by it, and in describing the scene afterwards said: “For over an hour I looked at the orator in a very reverie of wonder, and actually felt myself to be the most culpable man on earth.”

Here was one of the effects of Irish eloquence. Gentlemen, these are but two of the great group we are honoring. I can but glance at the others; they are almost as glorious. There was the fiery and impetuous Grattan, who moves in the heat of the mental conflict “with all his country beaming in his face,” whose eloquence was a combination of “cloud, whirlwind, and flame.” How beautiful his reply, how worthy of a patriot, when during his last illness his physician declared to him he would imperil his life if he spoke again in Parliament, which he was anxious to do, “I should be happy to die in the discharge of my duty.”

CURRAN.

There was the daring and delightful Curran—the very impersonation of the rapt orator, whose “eye glowed like living coals,” who carried his hearers with his tenderness and pathos into a flood of tears, or made the walls resound with shouts of uproarious laughter. “Pouring out his invective like a stream of lava, he inflamed almost to madness the minds of his countrymen by a recital of their wrongs,” and it would take hours to relate the wonderful stories told of his transcendent powers. To this day the memory of Curran and his wit is treasured among his countrymen with the same adoration the mother feels for her darling boy. How beautiful and thrilling his apostrophe to liberty! He said—“I speak of the British law which makes liberty commensurate with and inseparable from the British soil—which proclaims even to the stranger and the sojourner, the moment he sets his foot upon British earth, that the ground on which he treads is holy, and consecrated by the genius of universal emancipation. No matter in what language his doom may have been pronounced, no matter what complexion incompatible with freedom an Indian or an African sun may have burned upon him; no matter in what disastrous battle his liberty may have been cloven down, the first moment he touches the sacred soil of Great Britain, the altar and the god sink for ever in the dust, his soul walks abroad in her own majesty, his body swells beyond the measure of his chains that burst from around him, and he stands redeemed, regenerated, disenthralled, by the irresistible genius of universal emancipation.”

O'CONNELL.

And there, too, was this sovereign of the silver tongue, whose portrait looks down on us—“Kerry's pride and Munster's glory”—and whose dumb lips, could they speak, would give warm greeting for our kind thoughts of his immortal countrymen. It is not for me to go further into their histories—to tell the sad story of the clouds that hung like a pall over Sheridan's last hours, or the gloom that settled upon Burke. I treat solely of their genius. In contemplating their varied powers and points of beauty, we are like those who look out upon some grand scenes of nature and of art. We stand, as it were, upon a hilltop and look upon the transcendent landscapes. Each will select from the widespread glory at his feet, for his more special love and delight, some different glimpse of sunshine or solemn grove, or embowered spire, or brown mouldering ruin, or castellated cloud. During this contemplation the soul of each man is amidst its own creations and in the heart of his own solitude; nor is the depth of that solitude broken, though it lies open to the morning light, and before the eyes of unnumbered spectators. And, crowning praise of all, these men wielded their powers of eloquence as battle-blades in the same great cause he wielded his sword for so long and so well whose birthday we have just honored in our nation. If the sword of Washington was lifted in behalf of human rights, so were their electric voices. Then, gentlemen, blame me not if I have asked you to honor their memories. The beams they kindled in the days of their triumphs have left a broad track of light, which still plays in beauty adown the corridors of time, and although it is interrupted and shattered sunlight, you cannot remove it—it is sunlight still.

The long night just gone down, the sky has left us starless. Such men we have not. Such men we need. Let us summon the spirits of these illustrious dead, to infuse some of their old genius in our midst. Then will we spring into newness of life, and our praise be heard not only here below, for listening ears somewhere among the clouds will catch the strain, and from angelic hands a wreath of flame will descend upon the nation, and play round her head with a concentrated glory.