

A SOWER OF INFINITE SEED

JOHN BOYLE O'REILLY

Dear old Father Time has been called the impartial judge of artistic and literary excellence; but he seems to be so busy with a thousand and one other pursuits and occupations that unless he is occasionally reminded of what our favorites have done he will suffer their works to sink into oblivion and their memories to be enshrouded by the clouds of forgetfulness. In order that this may not occur in the case of one for whom we confess to have a special predilection, we intend to recall to his mind the life and achievements of a man whose acquaintance will prove enlightening to many and we hope, to some few at least, inspiring.

It is unfortunately true that many of those most highly gifted by nature have misused their talents; and, save for fitful bursts of genius, have become debtors rather than benefactors of mankind. This is especially true in the field of poetry. A love of the beautiful has been too frequently dissociated from a love of the true and the good, with the inevitable consequence that love degenerated into passion and the child of poesy, instead of raising his readers to heights whence they could see the eternal and the divine, left them still chained to the present and the human. This was not true of John Boyle O'Reilly. He perhaps to a greater degree than any other American poet realized that beauty, truth and goodness were but different manifestations of the one Reality. Beauty was for him not only lovely, but chaste and dignified; it had in his eyes an ennobling and a consecrating power. Hence it is that we are not surprised to see him treating of those subjects which not only please the fancy but purify the affections and elevate the mind. Honor, justice, liberty, patriotism and the dignity of man are, as it were, the woof of his literary efforts, while sincerity and kindness are the warp. Nor is this difficult to understand when we know the history of the man. He who had been reared in the school of Life, who had both seen and felt the effects of treachery, cruelty and oppression in their manifold forms without being embittered by them, was unquestionably the man among men who could write and speak eloquently and effectively of those great questions which knock for answer at every human heart.

Born June 28, 1844, in the neighborhood of Drogheda, Ireland—a place rich in legendary and historical lore—John had a splendid opportunity to acquire a rudimentary education, and at the same time to become imbued with a love of the heroic and the beautiful. The family was distinguished for its ancestral traditions and it was at his mother's knee that he learned the tragedy of Ireland. Sensitively responsive to her wrongs and sorrows, with all the ardor and enthusiasm of a generous soul he enrolled himself in the Fenian movement—a movement which had for purpose the restoration of Ireland to her national independence.

This is not the place to mention the reasons for the failure of that enterprise. Suffice it to say that, through incompetent leadership and treason, the plot was discovered; and formal sentence of death was pronounced against the conspirators. This sentence was shortly afterwards commuted to life imprisonment and in the case of a few to twenty years penal servitude.

The student of English prison life during the nineteenth century needs no description of the inhuman treatment accorded these men. Millbank, "where the flooding light is a derision"; Portsmouth, "where studied brutality was inflicted on the prisoners as the business," and Dartmoor, "where it was a common occurrence for the inmates to be punished for eating candles, boat-oil and other repulsive articles" were the stepping-stones which led O'Reilly and some of his confreres to the penal colony in Australia, 1868. The story of his escape in February of the following year, full of adventures and danger of recapture, rivals many a work of modern fiction. Eventually he arrived in Philadelphia, November, 1869, and immediately pledged his loyalty to his new-found home by taking out his first naturalization papers. Being told that Boston offered a larger and fruitful field for his activities, he accordingly made his abode there. He soon became affiliated with the Boston Pilot of which he became editor and part owner in 1876. He died by accidental poisoning, October 10, 1890.

Through The Pilot he labored for the amelioration of Ireland, for the development of unhyphenated Americanism among Irish Americans, and, in general, for the betterment of the poor and suffering. No causes worthy of a champion needed to call for his services a second time; no act of injustice escaped his denunciation, for "his brave heart was always ready to enter the

weak one's fight." He was not a mere editor; he was a teacher and a leader of his people. And the confidence reposed in him by them was a striking tribute to his enlightened judgment and to his unquestioned disinterestedness. "Never do as a journalist what you would not do as a man," and, "No writer for the press, however humble, is free from keeping his purpose high and his integrity white," embodied the principles upon which his entire career as a journalist was founded. Though a Democrat in politics, he never felt himself bound by any factional loyalty in the expression of his views. The freedom and purity of the press, the biographer of some one greater than a man, of a Day, were cardinal principles with him, and he never allowed party platforms or national prejudices to keep him from an observance of them.

In the midst of his editorial work he found time to indulge his poetic genius, and from his pen flowed some of the brightest ornaments of American verse. A contemporary of Whittier, Longfellow and Lowell, he is not the least conspicuous among them for the loftiness of his conception and the strength of his execution. True it is, he never acquired the smoothness of rhythm nor the exactness of metre which characterize the works of our greatest poets; but he regarded the manner of presentation as something secondary to the "wrongs and sorrows and throbbing hearts" of which he wrote. His later efforts, however, show a certain perfection of form which indicate that had time been given him he would have been able to rival his fellow poets even in their technique.

The themes of O'Reilly's poems are not unlike those of his prose. He always wrote himself, for, as he said, "A man must either write himself or a lie, and lies are failures." And so we can see a certain latent dignity and power, a whole-hearted sympathy and a purity of intention, running like a golden thread throughout his poetic effusions. James W. Riley has beautifully expressed his appreciation of O'Reilly's poems in the following lines:

"I like such poems as these—
Where every line is a vein of blood,
And rapturous blood, all unconfined,
As it leaps from a heart that has joyed and bled
With the right and wrong of all mankind."

He has been criticized for his lack of nature poems. This was due, however, to no failure on his part to admire the won-

ders of the Creator reflected in the inanimate world—for many a time and oft

“He longed for the dear old river
Where he dreamed his youth away.”

and

“He would fly to the wood’s low rustle
And the meadows kindly page”—

but to the fact that he felt it to be his duty to remain “planning and toiling in the crowded hives of men,” straining mind and heart to establish truth and justice among them. He loved nature and he loved art; but he love mankind more. And if circumstances were such that he had no opportunity of indulging in this easier and lighter phase of poetry, we should offer him our sympathy rather than our censure. Ours is the loss; for we feel confident that he would have been as successful in unfolding the beauties of nature as he was in laying bare sentiments and aspirations of the human soul.

Most of his longer poems are of an occasional nature, written for anniversaries, centennials, reunions etc., but they invariably rise above their local settings and assume a national or a world-wide aspect. What he said of Edmund Burke is true of himself:

“Races and sects were to him a profanity,
Hindoo and Negro and Celt were as one;
Broad as mankind was his splendid humanity,
Large in its record the work he has done.”

And so, whether singing of the heroic Pilgrim, of the suffering Irish patriot, or of the ostracized Negro, he strikes a note which finds a responsive chord in every heart. He could never believe but that a “man was made for a nobler end than glory of trade,” and he would teach him the lessons of kindness and sympathy.

“Partaking not of selfish aims, withholding not
The word that strengthens and the hand that helps,
Who waits and sympathizes with the pettiest life
And loves all things and reaches up to God
With thanks and blessing—He alone is living.”

Yes, he would lead his readers from the valleys of strife and sorrow to the mountaintops of peace and happiness—aye, as a spirit pilot, he would lead them from the mountain-tops to God. No one can read his poems on the Pilgrim Fathers, Wendell Philipps, Crispus Attucks, A Nation’s Test or The Patriot’s Grave, without catching a spark of the poet’s love of justice, of

his passion for liberty and of his intense faith in the goodness of men. "He knew that the struggle with wrong is a sacrificial fight—that the reward reserved for those who entered was a bleeding heart and a thorn-crowned brow—but he also knew that higher joy which comes from a consciousness of spending and being spent in the service of others. And so, not only by his writings but more particularly by his example, he encouraged others to enlist in the same cause.

Of his other poems, the "Statues in the Block" expresses the sublime truth—

"That when God gives us the clearest vision,
He does not touch our eyes with Love but Sorrow;"

"The Unspoken Word"

"That the kindly word unspoken is a sin—
A sin that wraps itself in purest guise
And tells the heart that, doubting looks within,
That not in speech but thought the virtue lies?"

"What is God," that

"Each heart holds the secret
Kindness is the word."

"The Infinite," that

"Only in meditation
The Mystery speaks to us."

And "The Cry of the Dreamer," that

"A dreamer lives forever
And a toiler dies in a day."

We must pass over his narrative poems and tales of Australian life and hasten to a consideration of his novel, "Moondyne." It is the story of an Australian convict who escaped from the chain-gang and acquired a leadership among the very wealthy natives of the Vasse. After many years, during which his record was forgotten, he returned to England and worked for the reform of the prison system, basing it upon the principle that men, even when lawfully deprived of liberty do not cease to have certain rights, and that prisons instead of brutalizing and embittering their inmates should reform them and send them forth better men than when they entered. He has been criticised as an idealist because of his belief in the natural goodness of men, when brought to the surface by kindness and intelligent sympathy. It

was, however, at least a move in the right direction, and the recent history of criminology has justified to a great extent the soundness of the views he advocated. Not that he assumes the attitude of a pedagogue instructing his readers in the principles of sociology and philanthropy; he is ever the arist. Under cover of a narrative teeming with graphic descriptions, exciting situations and profound reflections, he insinuates rather than states the truths which he wishes to teach. If we except Mr. Wyville, who seems at times to be not a mere man but the embodiment of a principle or the personification of virtue, his characters are living and human, his diction, refined, and his style energetic and interesting. We are certainly convinced that "Moondyne" would be a most suitable substitute for most of our "best-sellers."

It has been said that in describing the physical and moral qualities of the hero O'Reilly unconsciously portrayed himself. And we are of the opinion that Wyville is, in many respects at least, the ideal towards which he aimed. For he, too, was a man deeply moved by the wrongs and sufferings of his fellows, a man who felt that his time and talents had been given to him for the benefit of others; a man whose magnetic personality attracted and cast a ray of sunshine among a vast number of acquaintances and whose entire life was a consecration to duty, justice and truth. And so we trust that when Father Time is acting the role of the Cicerone in the Hall of Fame, he will pause awhile before a beautiful little niche enscribed, "John Boyle O'Reilly," and say to his auditors what O'Reilly himself said of Wendell Philipps, "A Sower of infinite seed was he, a ploughman who hewed toward the light."

—Cornelius McCarthy, O. P.

