

THE ORATORS OF IRELAND.

A LECTURE—BY THOMAS FRANCOIS MEAGHER.

I COME to speak of those whose memories are the inalienable inheritance of my poor country, and in the possession of which—even though she sits in desolation, in “tattered weeds,” and though “sharp misery has worn her to the bone”—a radiant pride tinges her pale cheek, and over her aching head rays of inextinguishable glory congregate. I come to speak of those who, with the beauty, the intrepidity, the power of the intellect that dwell within them, rescued the country of my birth from the obscurity and inanition to which the laws of evil men had doomed her, and which, having conquered for her an interval of felicity and freedom, left her with a history which the coldest or the haughtiest of her sons will revert to with love and pride, and on which the bitterest of her calumniators cannot meditate without respect.

It is well that the story of such men should be simply told. Their grand proportions need no cunning drapery. It would be worse than useless to gild the glowing marble. Like the statues in Evadne, each has a noble history, and, dead though they be, in their presence virtue grows strong, heroism kindles in the weakest, and the guilty stand abashed.

There is an old man, with stooped shoulders, long thin arms, the sparest figure, haggard face, lips grimly set, and an eye with the searching glance of a grey eagle—that is Henry Grattan.

What of him? He had a great cause, a great opportunity, a great genius. The independence of Ireland—the cause. The embarrassment of England with her colonies—the opportunity. With the magnitude of both his genius was commensurate. He was equal to his friends—as he himself said to his great rival, Harry Flood—and was more than equal to his foes. When he spoke, the infirmities and deformities of the man disappeared in a blaze of glory. His eloquence was more than human. “It was a combination of cloud, whirlwind and flame.” Nothing could resist it, nothing could approach it. It conquered all or distanced all. Like the archangel of Raphael, it was winged as well as armed. His intellect was most noble. His heart was not less divinely moulded. Never before did so much gentleness, so much courage, so much force, unite in one poor frame. The brightest event in Irish history is the great event of that great man’s life. If it is the brightest, let us refer it to his genius, his spirit, his ambition. His love of country was intense. “He never would be satisfied as long as the meanest cottager in Ireland had a link of the British chain clanking to his rage.” Thus he spoke moving the Declaration of Independence. The last time he appeared in the Irish Parliament was at midnight. He came from a sick bed. They gave him leave to sit whilst he addressed the House. For a moment—for a moment—his agony forsook him. Men beheld before their eyes a sublime transfiguration. “I rose,” said he, “with the rising fortunes of my country—I am willing to die with her expiring liberties.” Had he been at that time inspired with the republicanism of Wolfe Tone, his career and glory would have been complete.

And there is a dark, dwarfish figure, with a brown rugged face, short flat nose, an upturned earnest face, and an eye full of black lustre, his hands upon his hips, his awkward body swinging to and fro, as though it were convulsed—that is John Philpot Curran!

Who, knowing anything of Ireland, has not heard of him? Who, having heard the story of her wrongs and martyrdoms, has failed to love that loving, gallant, glowing nature? Who, at all familiar with the great features of his time, will refuse to him an exalted station and the most generous homage? In a period conspicuous for its wit, his was the brightest wit of all. At a time when the most profuse hospitality prevailed, his was the most genial nature that flowed and sparkled at the social board. In a crowded school of orators, each one of whom was prominent and towering, he stood, if not the foremost, second only to the foremost. When corruption was let loose, he stood unpurchasable and inviolate. In a reign of terror, he was dauntless and invincible. “You may murder,” he exclaimed one day to the armed ruffians who threatened him with their bayonets in the court-house, “but you cannot intimidate me.” In the midst of devastation, he was a guardian spirit and an immortal saviour. From the beginning to the end, he clung to the fortunes of his country—gave to her his love, his labors, his sorrows, the inspiration of his courage, the exhilarating warmth and splendor of his genius—gave them all to her in the fullest measure. Closing our hands in prayer, and bending in reverence beside his tomb, one regret alone may escape our lips in the contemplation of his career—that he did not die with those whom he strove to save.

On a broken ledge of granite, against which the green waves of the sea seemed to have worked many a long day, and in the shadow of a mountain clad in purple heath, and over which the mist is passing, there stands, as though it grew out of it, a massive figure—arms folded, stoutly limbed, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, erect, well-set, staunch, massive as the granite—small head, small grey twinkling eyes, flexible, small lips, features suffused with humour, yet lurking sagacity and purpose, and a consciousness of power—it is Daniel O’Connell!

Why say more? He himself uttered these words one day, in the spring of 1843: “I find my humble name has penetrated and become familiar along the Carpathian Mountains, and I verily believe the autocrat of Russia has heard of him who now addresses you. Portugal has heard of it—Spain has felt it. It has been talked of in the mountains of Hungary. Coupled with it, the woe of Ireland are heard of at the sources of the Missouri. From the springs that first fed the Mississippi, from the waters of the Ohio, from the summits of the Alleghennies and the wooded banks of the Monongahela—in every part of the Continent—from the forests of the Canadas to the morasses of New Orleans—with my name is mingled the cry for the restoration of the liberties of Ireland.”

The utterance of these words was no heinous ostentation. His own importance he did not exaggerate. No one will dispute it. The celebrity of his name was measured by seas and continents. I have seen a rude likeness of him in the Australian forest—in a log hut—the

owner of it a native of the forest—miles and miles aloof from the outward circle of civilisation.

Nothing within the range of human capacity, in the way of revolution and administration, was to him impossible. He could easily have recovered the confiscated privileges of 1782. His dominion exceeded that of Henry Grattan, though his military resources were less ostensible. Had he willed it, he would have been crowned in 1843, and his dynasty established. Imbued with loftier aspirations still, he could have thrown the crown to the moths and worms, and, like Washington, have inaugurated the sovereignty of his people, under the code and banners of a republic.

Yet, failing to do so, and failing in other instances, and perhaps more culpably, he did much for Ireland—much for her in his earlier years—much for her before the sun of life moved downwards from the zenith; and dying he bequeathed a memory to his country, which contributes largely to that stock of wealth which no laws can confiscate no adversary deteriorate—a memory which those who differ from him most, and censure him the most severely, will, for the honour of the country, be solicitous and jealous to perpetuate.

A little nearer to us, but close to that colossal figure, stands a smaller one—one by many inches smaller, and by many degrees less impressive, yet most striking. For, though the little figure is slight, wiry, angular, the attitude is fine—one foot hastily advanced—hair swept back from the forehead, as if a wild gust had struck it—the head projecting, and eyes of a fierce black beauty darting from it—and then a white hand of the most exquisite shape, flung passionately in the air, and quivering and flashing as it threatens—it is Richard Lalor Shiel.

Less liberally endowed with the great attributes of those who preceded him, he is nevertheless worthy of a place in the Pantheon which they occupy. His nature less susceptible of great impressions, his integrity in political matters more questionable, his ambition decidedly less generous, nevertheless, his instincts were kindred to theirs, his spirit as intrepid, his intellect as vivid, and, if less majestic, better cultivated.

Throughout a hard contest, he fought with a ceaseless impetuosity, and to the victorious issue of it contributed, not less by the magic of his rhetoric than by the rapid continuity of his labor. Never passive, never halting, never downcast—always on the march, ever in action, ever hopeful, communicating the enthusiasm of his genius to the thousands with whom he felt and for whom he spoke; the timid were emboldened, the sluggish were impelled—the fire, the force, or the action was sustained, until for him, and for his comrades, and for his cause, and for an outcast race and creed proscribed, the triumph was achieved. With the dethronement of a detestable ascendancy, with the enactment of the law repealing the disabilities which in the name of religion had been iniquitously imposed, his name in the history of his country is inseparably identified. He had the opportunity, the field, the ability to do more. He could have reached a loftier eminence—have left a broader effulgence above his grave. The last chapter of his life casts a shadow on those which commemorate the promise of his youth and the glory of his prime. He gathered in one harvest. In his old age he might have reaped another one and more plenteous, and then have gone to sleep, having worthily fulfilled his days.

Yet he, too, leaves a name behind which his country cannot afford to lose; which it would be unnatural for her to proscribe; which she could not injure without impoverishing the inheritance which, generation after generation, her children, reciprocating the bounty of their mother, have bounteously bequeathed.

But who is that—the last in the group—so tall, so handsome, so gay, so commanding, “with so much vivacity, frankness, chivalry in his look and bearing—with such deep brows, with so broad and white a forehead, with eyes of so intense lustre that some one whispers to us they could give expression to a face of clay?” Who else can it be but him of whom an ecstatic sister wrote that “his cheeks had the glow of health; his eyes, the finest in the world, the brilliancy of genius; and yet were as soft as a tender and affectionate heart could render them.” Who else can it be but him, whose name cannot be mentioned without all that is beautiful, all that is strange, all that is sad, all that is glorious, all that is inexplicable, in the history of our country, flashing upon the mind—half in cloud and half in glory? Who else can it be but Richard Brinsley Sheridan?

If his nature partook of the caprices of our climate, that nature was as fruitful and abounding as our soil. Tumbling to destruction himself, he would stop to rescue others. Of selfishness there was not a particle in his nature—neither in his concerns nor in his public life. He had a thought, a word, an honest hand, for all. Cast into the whirling current of aristocratic life, his sympathies never swerved from the people. In him, as in Charles Fox, the French Revolution found a resolute defender. When old Doctor Johnston comes out against America with his pamphlet entitled, “Taxation no tyranny,” Sheridan promptly takes the part of America; dismisses the lumbering old doctor as “the man of letters who had been drawn from obscurity by the inquisitive eye of a sovereign,” and the pamphlet itself as nothing better in sincerity or value than “a venal birthday ode.” Cared by princes; a man of the highest note among the notables of England; with England for his field of action and pedestal of his fame; he never lost sight of Ireland—never looked with a careless or supercilious eye upon her defects, her grievances, her destitution—never, never shaped his sentiments and votes in her regard to suit the vicious propensities of his patrons. That he had many frailties, his warmest admirers will not deny. But the age in which he lived, and the society of which he was the favorite, was remarkable neither for the regularity of its morals nor the purity of its pleasures.

It is rumoured (we learn from the Sydney press) that Sullivan, the New Zealand murderer, is in Sydney.

The carcass of a whale was cast ashore on the beach near Patua last week, which was utilised by being converted into oil, of which a considerable quantity was obtained.