CARLETON AND YEATS: MYSTICISM AND MYSTICS

(By T. P. CUMMINS.)

When one ventures into the domain of literary criticism a grave risk is incurred by the intruder. It is not a free domain by any means, but privileged critic and observer in the present case meet disarmed, for the atmosphere is congenial to both. Both love Carleton despite his blunders, and they love him because of the peasant that is in him. His foolish errors, due to his unfortunate perversion, can be condoned for the sake of that truth and love of the Irish sod and people that welled up from his great heart. His heart was sound at the core however much his earlier work was bartered for mercenary ends. I think, like many others, he lived to regret much of what he had written under stress of actual misery.

I have induced myself to venture this paper as a result of the able notes on Carleton that appeared in a recent number of the *Tablet;* and also because I read him again and again when the world was a flower garden to me, and my portion of it, an Irish hamlet, the fairest corner in that garden. I put Carleton away with a great love in my heart for Ireland, and the men and women of the Irish countryside. He opened my eyes to the beauty, sterling worth, and tragic scenes around me, and to-day though I am an exile, and "not so young as I used to be," I can still turn with avidity to that most beautiful of Irish romances—*Willy Reilly and His Dear Colleen Bawn.*

Three immortals—Carleton, Yeats, and Connolly,—focussed the attention of the *Tablet's* literary critic. Certain portions of their works were briefly reviewed or criticised. My remarks are complementary, supplementary, and concisely controversial, and I have been encouraged to essay the task as a close student of all three. Otherwise I should not allow myself to linger in a domain that I would be happier in meekly surveying.

There is a certain literary relationship—strange as it may seem—between Carleton and Yeats. Between either of them and Connolly there is no affinity. Connolly is a new, strange light, whether fixed or meteoric has yet to be discovered. Carleton and Yeats are literary luminaries. My remarks in the present paper are confined to them and their influence on the Celtic Renaissance.

With most of the criticism bestowed on Carleton one must agree, though his errors were the result of misery and perversion and cannot be traced to any latent hostility. Priests are not disembodied spirits; they are humans, and those of us who think and feel at all should be thankful to God many of them are so human. One of the most charming and simple priests it has been my luck to meet was precisely one such individual that a Carleton or Pat McGill might "fix on," and hold up to the scorn of mankind, while sacrilegious renegades such as Renan, McCabe, and some others receive the plaudits and laurels of the mob, the so-called intellectuals, and even posterity as well. It seems to me that the reason for this is: one continues in obedience despite his human frailties, and the others, in addition to their frailties, rebel, become a law unto themselves, and dangerous beacons to lure the evil and foolish of heart toward the rocks of perdition. However, one can forgive Carleton a great deal: his was a splendid personality. He, more than Davis or any of the writers of the *Nation*, saved the early nineteenth-century from the sweeping indictment of "stage Irishism." Because of this, and for that Irish wholesomeness to be found in his pages, he merits a niche in the temple that enshrines the fathers of the Celtic Renaissance. Such a position has not been accorded him regardless of the fact that his inspiration was drawn from the fountain-heads of truth—the soil and the people. At present he stands a neglected champion at the crossings of Anglo-Irish literature, but a champion nevertheless. One cannot place him in the inner temple with Standish O'Grady, but he has earned a place all to himself at the portal. Has he not in his own just, unique style indicated one way that many moderns, profiting by his blunders and discoveries, have essayed to tread toward the temple where Yeats is already crowned in the flesh?

Carleton was born in Prillisk, Co. Tyrone, in 1794. He wrote at a difficult period, a period prolific of "stage Irishism" and much commercialism. He died in 1869. Alfred Perceval Graves, already rewarded with a little niche in the temple of Anglo-Irish literary pioneers, says of him: "He is generally regarded as one of the finest exponents of Irish character drawing." We all agree with Mr. Graves—

> "And there is trophy, banner, and plume,
> Killeevy, O Killeevy!
> And the pomp of death with its darkest gloom
> O'ershadows the Irish chieftain's tomb
> By the bonnie green woods of Killeevy."

As one of the finest exponents of Irish character drawing there is a link that binds Carleton to the fathers of the Celtic re-birth. W. B. Yeats has been acclaimed by some of his friends as the Irish Shelley. He holds a supreme position in Anglo-Irish literature. With possibly only A.E. to challenge his supremacy in the inner temple, we find immediately within the portal James Clarence Mangan and Sir Samuel Ferguson. William Carleton is at the portal. There are only a few critics who ignore his presence there, though no one can deny he is one of the precursors of the renaissance.

Carleton had seen nine years of existence when poor Mangan was born to his life of "woe and pain, pain and woe," and was 16 when little Samuel Ferguson was set upon the teeming current of life. At this period Yeats's soul was still in the Master's Mind to be launched into being in 1866. Dublin has the honor of being his birth-place.

His literary activity commenced with the appearance of *Mosada*, a work dealing with romantic Spain. The advent of this brochure disclosed Yeats a seeker. Like many dreamers his mind went to the four ends of the world utterly oblivious of the crocks of gold that long lay buried at his feet. In the beginning he wrote more as the result of deep methodical reading and academical discipline than from the dictates of his heart and mind. He frankly admits that his earliest poems were too full of the colors "Shelley gathered in Italy." Nevertheless, one cannot dismiss *Mosada* without being powerfully impressed by such promise from a boy in his teens. *Mosada* did not attract general attention, but the literati extended their admiration for it. Rarely has it been the good fortune of any young poet to receive encouragement. Even his most indulgent friends are inclined to look upon the youth as merely an indolent dreamer. Perhaps it is just as well. Such methods may result in the survival of the fittest.

Spenser's and Shelley's influence on the mind of Yeats was supplemented later by the mysterious effects of Theosophy and Spiritualism. These movements had a marked influence upon him, as Theosophy had later on A.E. It seems remarkable that shallow influences of the kind should even for a while tend to lead the poet not into the dead ends of Hinduism and other Eastern cults to find a proper expression of himself, but rather back with a plunge into the heroic age of Eirinn. In the Theosophical gatherings in Dublin he wandered aimlessly with other minds as much astray as his own—minds too that later plunged into the heroic depths of Ireland's history, and gave to the world some splendid work. It was not Theosophy itself, but rather the environment in the movement that tended to turn the spirit of Yeats toward the heroic age, whither other minds reverted as well. It must be remembered that influences more powerful still were just then at work leading men's minds back to the age of Conchobar, Cucullain, Maeve, and Emain Macha. Chief among these influences were the works of Standish O'Grady and Sir Samuel Ferguson. O'Grady first pierced the depths and disclosed the immensity and richness of the treasure that the bards, story-writers, essayists, and historians of Ireland had blindly overlooked. Mangan and Carleton had surveyed and probed the surface; Mangan with considerable success. Ferguson delved deepest. But it remained for O'Grady to vision the depths in his own mind, and then delve fearlessly down. His faith and labor were amply rewarded. Hence, as Ernest A. Boyd establishes clearly, O'Grady was the father of that renaissance which has given to Ireland a unique literature, "which, although not written in Gaelic, is none the less informed by the spirit of the race." Carleton ranks among the precursors despite the hostility of Mr. Boyd. He cannot be apportioned to English literature with the ease one can dispose of Goldsmith and Bernard Shaw. It cannot be said that the work of these gifted writers "is informed by the spirit of the race." Though Carleton is among the precursors of the renaissance he was not a delver: he was a surface man. He saw the Ireland of his day through Irish eyes, and he inhaled the pungency of the soil he stood on. His work is thoroughly "informed by the spirit of the race," and Yeats would be among the first to acknowledge him in his merited position—near Mangan and Ferguson. Yeats knows his Carleton, and as far back as 1889 his *Stories From Carleton* was published. This work in itself links up the author of *Willy Reilly* and *The Black Prophet* with one of the finest poets of our day.

The author of *Mosada* quickly became a shareholder in the mine located by O'Grady. He contributed four pieces to *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*, and one of the four—*The Madness of King Goll*—is among the best he has written. The disciple of the occultists had liberated himself for the time being, and heroic Eirinn claimed him instead. Three years after *Mosada*, appeared what appeals to me, and more competent critics, as his