Two Obituaries of the Bard of Thomond (1832-1899)

The Bard of Thomond: Dead Sketch of the Poet's Career

Michael Hogan, otherwise known as the Bard of Thomond, died on Wednesday night, at his residence, Rutland Street. The deceased was a man remarkable in many ways, and like others of his class, lived a life of over, but by many alone by Limerick people all the world over, by many litterateurs, both in England and America, and wherever the name and works of Poet Hogan were known and admired. He was born on 1st November, 1832, at New Road, Thomondgate, close by the banks of the grand old Shannon, which he learned to love as the gate, close by the banks of the grand old Shannon. Here, indeed, was an exhaustible foundation of the work which afterwards raised his name above the ordinary name of rhymer. Here were grown the seeds of enchanting remembrances of glorious summer mornings and fairy evenings I spent alone by the bright, blue beautiful Shannon still linger round me like weird effusions, and took him under his patronage. It was while still engaged at the mill that he composed some of his Wittiest verses including "The Asketon Goat," "The Miller's Song," "The Rollicking Bugabo," a parody on "The Humours of Olin," and last, though by no means least, "Drunken Thady." From this time forward...
he contributed largely to local and other literature, and his name occupied a prominent place among the literary men of his time in this country. He compiled, not without considerable difficulty, a volume of his contributions, but was not over fortunate with his publishers. He satirised his own public to a painful degree, the Bard got married, the ceremony being performed by the late Bishop Butler, the Dean of St Mary's. This particular suffered in this respect, as did many of its officers and those in any way connected with it. Many of us have read, deigned not to smile on him, and he led a precarious existence for one of his accomplishments until 1886, when with the aid and council of some friends, he turned his face westward, and sailed for the Greater Ireland across the seas. Even here ill fortune still pursued him, while his health, never very robust, began to decline. The circumstances coming to the knowledge of his friends in Limerick, a committee was formed with Mr F A O'Keeffe, M.P., as Chairman, and which included a number of our most prominent business and public men. A substantial subscription was raised, and the Bard was brought back to end his days in his native city. A position, not very lucrative, but one, at least, which saved him from further pecuniary difficulties, was found for him in the Corporation. From that time to the present he lived a life of comparative quiet, and died on Wednesday night, widely regretted by his fellow countrymen and citizens of his loved and faithful Limerick - R.I.P.

The funeral took place on yesterday, from St Michael's Parochial Church, the remains being followed to St Laurence Cemetery, where the interment took place, by the Mayor and members of the Corporation, accompanied by the Corporate officers. A large section of the citizens also attended, as a mark of respect to the memory of the deceased.

The Munster News and Limerick and Clare Advocate, 22 April 1899.

"The Last of the Irish Bards."

Under the title of "The last of the Irish Bards" Mr Michael MacDonagh* contributes to this week's Academy the following interesting article on the Bard of Thomond:-

"The Bard of Thomond," who died in Limerick on April 19, was an Irish peasant poet with a distinctive touch of genius. In the cabins of the South of Ireland, where the works of the poets of what is called "the Celtic revival" are absolutely unknown, and, if known, the mysticism which is their chief characteristic would only bewilder and repel, as something entirely foreign to the modes of mind and habits of thought of the humble occupants, the Bard's war-ballads, legendary poems, and songs of the joys, the griefs, the ideals, the superstitions of the country folk are sung and recited, stirring the blood and making the hearts of the hearers beat faster, like the inspiring blast of a trumpet. Michael Hogan - who may, in truth, be described as the last of the Irish bards - was born in very humble circumstances. His father earned a precarious wage as a carpenter and wheelwright; and he himself was taken from school at the age of ten - his sole educational equipment being, as he once told me, the ability to write indifferently and spell badly - to work as a labourer in a Limerick flour mill. Twenty years of his life were given to this rough and uncongenial labour; but his poetic imagination and his natural talent for verse, of which he gave early indications by lampooning some of his fellow-workers in the mill, were kept alive and nourished by the varied course of reading, chiefly poetical and historical, to which he devoted the evenings after a day's hard toil.

In 1880 Hogan collected all the songs and ballads he had written for the Dublin journals, or published locally in pamphlet form, and they were issued in a substantial volume entitled "Lays and Legends of..."
Thomond," by Messrs Gill & Son, Dublin. It is by this book that the Bard will be best remembered. His works show that Hogan was a typical bard, that he possessed all the literary qualities of his ancient prototypes, their pride and insolence, their exalted notions of the greatness and dignity of their office, their rhetorical passion, their extravagant imagery, their vigour of description - which are to be found in the sagas of the Irish bards. In one of his poems he writes:

Here's to the Bards! the brave old Bards! who kindled the martial fire
In Chief and Prince with the eloquence
and magic of harp and lyre;
When the soul of the proud, like a
lightning-cloud, flamed up at the thrill of
Song,
And leapt to the light, with a fierce
delight, to avenge an unmanly wrong;
When the godlike might
Worth, fame, and right
Were defended by steel-served men -
O God of the Free!
It was grand to see
The pomp of our country then!

Here is another passage characteristic of
his powers, from "A Life Picture":

I am Bard to none but the God above
Who sent me the gift of the Song
From His angel choir, and taught me
to love
The right, and to hate the wrong!
I sing no tinsell'd acrobat's praise,
I crouch at no lordling's knee:
Nor birth nor blood, but the True and
Good,
And the Loving, are themes for me!

At times his outlook on life was jaundiced
and gloomy. He continues:

But scarce as the Just, are the True and
the Good,
And the Loving on earth are few,
And the hemlock grows where the sweet
wild rose
That was planted by God's hand, grew!
Heaven wastes its glory in endless floods
- Earth blossoms in every part
While the serpent breeds and the
Nettle buds
In the gloom of the human heart!

As a specimen of the wild and whirling
words of his battle-pieces and their breathless life and action, the following passages are typical:

The wild battle-blitz of the trumpet has sounded
Andswift to the onset the giant hosts bound;
The field flamed and roared with the torrent of arms
Like a huge forest swung by the madness
of storms.
Have you seen, at Ardmore, the white
banners advancing,
When the sea to the tune of the
whirlwind is dancing?

Michael MacDonagh, from an
illuminated address presented to him
on the occasion of his departure from
Limerick, 18 January 1885.
Limerick Museum.

And the wave giants, rising and roaring
together,
With their awful war-songs, charging
mad at each other?
Thus raged the dread fight in
tumultuous disorder,
Shields leap'd from the axes, in many a
splinter
Like with'er'd leaves lost from the dark
groves of winter;
And towering heads sunk, with the
helmets that bound them,
While their reeking brains smok'd on the
weapons that found them.

But the Bard had softer moods, as his
many love songs testify. In his "Colleen Dhu" he sings:

My life was a sunless thing,
A dead leaf on a withering tree,
Till you, like heaven's dawn of Spring,
With leaves and blossom came to me.
My heart was as a lonely well,
That song or sunshine never knew,
Until your beauty's radiance fell
Into its depths, my Colleen Dhu!
I wish I were a mountain-fay,
And you a little honey-cup,

I'd range the summer fields all day
'Verfind you out, and drink you up!
Your soul within my soul, we'd live
The long years of creation thro'.
And Heaven above could only give
An equal joy, my Colleen Dhu.

Hogan had an extravagant and almost
child-like pride in his title of "Bard of
Thomond," and he loved to show himself
to the people of Limerick in the ancient
garb of the office, often to a very ludicrous-
effect. Personally, he was a low-sized and
thick-set man, with a homely, florid face
unmistakably Irish in its cast and
expression - fringed by an unkempt red
beard. One of the earliest things I can
remember was a procession of the trades
of Limerick, with bands and banners, on
the inauguration of a new mayor. In the
centre of a triumphal chair sat the Bard of
Thomond - a comic figure - clad in a long
white robe, and on his head a tinsel crown,
leaming in a reflective attitude over a harp,
with a young lady in green and gold,
typical of Erin, by his side; while on
another car, copies of the Bard's
"Inauguration Odes" were being worked off
on a printing press, and distributed to the
people. In another procession I remember
seeing him in the character of Neptune,
seated in a fishing boat, wearing a green
robe, and a trident in his hand. In after
years I got to know him intimately. He was
a most entertaining companion. His
literary information was wide; he knew all
the legends, traditions, and superstitions
of Clare and Limerick, which he had
picked up first hand from the peasantry of
those counties. He was very shrewd in his
estimate of men and things, and had a
keen sense of humour. He delighted in
reciting his ballads. His voice was low and
hoarse; but he would work himself into a
frenzy of passion when describing the
crash of the contending clans in his
rhetorical battle pieces.

In 1889, when the Bard was in very
indigent circumstances, the Corporation of
Limerick appointed him to a sinecure office,
called the "Rangership of the Shannon's
Banks," at a salary of a pound per week. At
one time some of the councillors who had felt the sting of his
satire insisted that he should be called upon
to send in a report on the condition
of the banks of the river. His report was as
follows:

"The banks are in good condition, but
the ceiling would be the better for an
occasional application of whitewash." The
reference to the ceiling mystified one of
the city fathers at the meeting of the Town
Council, and when the Clerk explained
that it meant "the blue vault of heaven," he
indignantly declared that he did not come
there to be humbugged.

*Michael MacDonagh, a journalist with the
Musmter News and Limerick and Clare
Advocate, left Limerick in January 1885 to
take up a post with the Freeman's Journal
in Dublin.