

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 vicissitudes, in which the harsher features of existence were always painfully predominant. The announcement of his death will be learned with regret, not alone by Limerick people all the world over, but 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 years of reason brought with them the power of observance, and which, as time advanced, he sang of so sweetly in many of the works which he has left behind as a lasting *souvenir* of his memory. If the quotation "poets are born, not made" goes for anything, it applies in an especial sense to the Bard of Thomond. Born under circumstances none too favourable for one fired with genius, ambition, and love of art, his early training and school days were not such as were likely to develop the intellect and foster the possibilities inherent in the man - possibilities which needed but the leavening of education to impel him forward as it were by his own ambition and personality. Genius, however, like water will find its own level, and so it was with the subject of this sketch, who overcame the many obstacles which barred his way. As already stated he was born some sixty-seven years ago at Thomondgate, his father, Arthur Hogan, being a man of many parts as far as handiwork was concerned. He was a cabinet-maker, wheel wright, mill wright, carmaker, housecarpenter, with one or two other occupations thrown in. He had the virtue moreover of being a skilled musician with a *penchant* for Irish ballad poetry. He played on many instruments, and made not a few of them with his own hands. His rendering of the charming old melodies attracted lovers of music for a considerable area round, and possessed of a pleasing and witty, yet withal a refined

and engaging, manner he was both loved and respected by all. It is more than probable that it was from the father that the young Hogan imbibed his soul for song and music. At the early age of eight he commenced writing, the composition, as might have been expected from such a child, being crude and unformed, yet with a tone of satire in it which caused his friends to wonder, and the subject of his aspirations to wince with discomfiture. His own uncle was his first victim, but as time went on, to use his own words, "he caused for himself a sea of trouble." Every individual in the parish who had in any way earned for himself what is familiarly called a "character" was lampooned in a merciless way. This earned him the laughter and encouragement of many with a corresponding degree of hate and threats of vengeance from others who happened to fall under the lasir of ridicule. His taste for satire did not, however - very luckily for himself - at this time continue very long, and we shortly after find him turning to more attractive subjects, as he haunted the banks of his own beloved Shannon. Here, indeed, was an exhaustless theme for a bard, widening towards him as he approached it, a field for thought and romance. Beauty in all its natural wealth was open to him and, as he says himself, "he fell in love with nature." Wandering daily among the groves and meadows bordering on the noble river, which he followed in its meanderings through some of the prettiest landscapes in the country, it is a matter for small surprise that his young soul became imbued with all he saw and felt, and nature found in him a new interpreter. It was here he became inspired, and laid the foundation of the work which afterwards raised his name above the ordinary name of rhymers. Here were grown the seeds of thought which in after years blossomed and produced "The Lays and Legends of Thomond." We quote his own words, "the enchanting remembrances of glorious summer mornings and fairy evenings I spent alone by the bright, blue beautiful Shannon still linger round me like weird music" - such were the poet's thoughts and ideals, and can we wonder they broke forth in song? With the materials obtainable to one in his position, and gifted with his natural intelligence, he eagerly devoted all his spare time to reading. His selection of authors had

something to do with his time and style, and if experience in diversity of expression and mode of opinion and language in others, has the effect of improving or aiding in the culture of the mind, certainly the Bard enjoyed a fairly extensive range. That such promiscuous reading did improve him is, however, a matter for considerable doubt; some of his satires in later years were clever but inelegant. His favourite authors were MacPherson's "Ossian"; the imagery with which the beautiful composition teems enchanted him; Pope, Homer, Goldsmith, Carleton, Dryden, Virgil, Tasso, Burns, Moore, Mitchel, Denis Florence MacCarthy, Thomas Davis, and others, were all alike read, and studied with avidity. Tradition, in particular, whether fictional or otherwise, he became enamoured of, and in Irish folk lore he had ample scope to satiate his longings. In his own autobiography he tells us of his schoolboy visits to raths and forts, old castles and dismantled ruins, the remaining links of a troubled though romantic past. While on the subject of school days, it should be mentioned that he was sent, while still very young, to the Christian Brothers' Schools in his own parish, where he spent more time lampooning his comrades than learning his texts of grammar. To use his own lines-

*"I never learned a common rule
In any book;
For I like every headstrong mule,
My own way took."*

After twelve months at the seminary mentioned he severed his connection therewith and began to assist his father at wheelmaking; but his taste did not lie in the work, and he turned his attention to spinning machinery, which he forsook in due time, and next found employment at Newtown Perry Mills, near Lock Quay. Here he was in a more congenial atmosphere. The clerk, one William Doyle, with a turn for literature, discovered a fancy for the youth's 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 Askeaton Goat," "The Miller's Song," "The Rollicking Bugaboo," a parody on "The Humours of Glin," and last, though by no means least, "Drunken Thady." From this time forward



Michael Hogan, Bard of Thomond. Painting by Dermot O'Brien PRHA, 1934, after a photograph by Thomas P. Geary

Limerick Museum.

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 in the most cutting manner every public body and individual who happened to fall foul of his pen. The Corporation in particular suffered in this respect, as did many of its officers and those in any way connected with it. Many of us have read, or have heard spoken of, the spicy lines on "Shawn-na-Scoob." This was but one of many in a similar vein. For real merit, however, "The Lays and Legends of Thomond," helped most to exhibit the poetical genius of the Bard, and to establish the reputation which, locally at all events, merits more than a passing glance in history. In this work we experience a touch of real art and high

impulse. His battle songs teem with fine imagery, and contain passages filled with life and energy, his legends abound with touches of feeling and truthfulness, while other passages whether of love or war breathe a true poetic spirit. In 1856, having experienced the ups and downs of fortune to a painful degree, the Bard got married, the ceremony being performed by the late Bishop Butler, the Dean of St Mary's. This was subsequent to the production of his "Lays and Legends," but still fortune 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-nerved 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 autocrat's praise,
I crouch at no lordling's knee:
Nor birth nor blood, but the True and
the 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-blast of the trumpet has
sounded
And swift to the onset the giant hosts
bounded;
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
billows 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,
And the sounding plain trembled from
centre to border.
Spears whistled and rattled in deadly
collision,
To the hearts of the inhabitants seeking
admission;
Souls of heroes, forsaking the temples
that shrined them,
Flew out thro' red rents from the clay
that confined them;
Shields leap'd from the axes, in many a
splinter
Like wither'd leaves tost 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
To find 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, leaning 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 Ode" 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.

*Munster News and Limerick and
Clare Advocate, 6 May 1899*

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