Limerick people have taken, Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, to their hearts. He will certainly not be forgotten within the foreseeable future. Since his death in 1899 his Drunken Thady has been read and enjoyed, indeed even recorded — all 386 lines — in his native city and further afield. (The last I heard that poem recited, word perfect, was some years ago in a pub near Lough Gur). The outlines of his turbulent life are, I believe, equally well known; while every decade or so, a new edition of some of his poems, or a series of articles on his life and work appear. Of his popularity there can be no question; it began when he was a young man writing for The Munster News, and it is still with us eighty years after his death.

But while eulogies there are in plenty, one will search in vain for any critical assessment of the Bard’s work. Until recently, at any rate, it was apparently as anathema to be critical of him, as it would have been foolhardy to criticise him, and thus incur his wrath, while he was alive.

However, now that the dust of decades has settled on the majority of the poems he wrote — only a few are remembered today — some attempt at an evaluation of his work will cause a ripple or two at most compared to the storm it would certainly have produced some years ago.

Michael Hogan, who was born in 1832, began writing at an early age. We can, however, assume that the best of his work was written in post-suffragist Ireland, and at the time when the Young Irelanders’ paper The Nation, was read throughout the land by rich and poor. From a cursory examination of most of his ballads, it is quite obvious that Hogan was greatly influenced by the poets of The Nation. The similarities in many instances are so obvious that one would be tempted to accuse him of plagiarism if he were not so much of an individualist at heart. In fact, he published some poems anonymously in The Nation. But the influence of the paper on the Bard was a mixed blessing. The patriotism, the pride in our past which The Nation proclaimed was a new concept to Hogan, something which he tried to imitate even if he did not quite understand.

If we take, almost at random, any of his poems it will, I believe, show the Bard’s faults as well as his undoubted powers. Take, for example, “The Fairy Bride”, subtitled “A Legend of Killeely”. It is a wonderful tale. Briefly, it tells of most of his ballads, it is quite obvious that one would be tempted to accuse him of plagiarism if he were not so much of an individualist at heart. In fact, he published some poems anonymously in The Nation. But the influence of the paper on the Bard was a mixed blessing. The patriotism, the pride in our past which The Nation proclaimed was a new concept to Hogan, something which he tried to imitate even if he did not quite understand.

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