

The Bard of Thomond

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 recited — all 380 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-Famine 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 how Cathol MacCurtain, the bard of Donough O'Brien of Thomond, rescues



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his young Eileen from the fairies who had taken her to their palace in the sky. Grand stuff — but somehow we are not quite convinced. It is a bit too theatrical, too much like a film scenario. Unnecessary details, which retard rather than assist the free flow of the tale, are introduced. This is one of the Bard's worst faults. Most of his ballads are far too long: they could do with merciless pruning. Try reading one and you will find that the monotony of his heroic couplets and alexandrines is wearying. Apparently, he also believed that piling adjective upon adjective was the only way to create atmosphere, whereas one judicious word could be more effective. He essayed too much. He lumbered his tales with too much detail, and very often we cannot see the wood for the trees. In short, Hogan was, as Distraeli said of Gladstone, "animated by the exuberance of his own verbosity". In "The Fairy Bride", too, another glaring fault of his is evident. He was guilty of some atrocious rhymes, and one comes across occasional rhyming words which are not to be found in any dictionary.

But what of the other side of the coin? Again take this line from "The Fairy Bride": "The light of the moon seems to freeze in each fold". This beautiful simile would, I feel, if penned by a Tennyson or a Pope, be now found in many a dictionary of quotations. And the more one reads the Bard the more one comes across such felicitous lines — lines which one can repeat over and over again with pleasure.

But it is when the Bard forgets the remote past and Ireland's wrongs that he really delights us. His "Drunken Thady", that long semi-ribald poem, is a classic of its kind, memorable, well told, and with many passages of sustained suspense. The description of Drunken Thady "giddy as a summer midge/Went staggering towards old Thomond Bridge" is perfect. The whole poem conjures up a vision of old Limerick which is, we feel, as accurate and true as Goldsmith's description of the village schoolmaster. On ballads such as this are reputations made.

Apart from "Drunken Thady" one finds, I believe, the authentic Hogan not in his "Lays and Legends of Tho-

mond", but in those little pamphlets he had published at one shilling each, entitled "The Story of Shawn-a-Scoob". Hogan saw everything in black and white, and the poverty and the political jobbery of the Limerick of his day aroused his fury, and when his "dander was up" he could write almost as venomously as Swift. He essayed, as he says himself, "to expose corruption and political jobbery in every sphere", and he promised their friends and admirers "photographs more true to life and nature than those contained in their albums". But what he produced were not photographs but cruel caricatures. His vitriolic pen was adept at sketching the warts and nothing more.

We look back nostalgically to the Bard and his times, and while we must admire his moral courage and sympathise with the hard lot that was habitually his, we should not, I feel, place him on a higher pedestal than he deserves. The word genius should be used sparingly; it should not be mentioned in the same breath as the Bard. Essentially, he was a colourful local character with a fertile imagination and a gift for rhyme, a balladeer of distinction who often smothered his first love in a welter of words. Perhaps he was too ambitious? Perhaps the initial praise he received led him to essay what was beyond his powers? It would also appear that the Bard often wrote in the heat of the moment, and often tossed off several verses of a whole ballad at a sitting.

"Inflame", he writes, "my soul, O Muse, with fierce desire To draw the picture, with a touch of fire". Yes, the Muse often inflamed him with a touch of fire, but Michael Hogan seems to have assumed that the Muse was always by his side. She was not. She often deserted him, rather alarmed, I would suggest, by his intoxication with words, or annoyed by his tendency to go off at a tangent rather than keep to the essentials of his story.

If, in his young days, he had been warned against the common mistake of saying too much, if he had been schooled to omit irrelevant and unnecessary details, if he had learned to alter the rhythm of his ballads, he would, I feel sure, have developed into a better poet; for, as I have tried to point out, the stuff of which poets are made was in his make-up. On the other hand if he had developed along these lines, he may never have written Drunken Thady, and Thomondgate, and indeed Limerick, would have been all the poorer had he not done so.