

THREE NEW BOOKS OF POEMS



THE London Times thus reviews three new books of poems, the authors being, respectively, Stephen Phillips, Herbert Trench, and Margaret L. Woods:—
Each of these three volumes contains a good deal of unrhymed verse. English poetry possesses, of course, in its "blank verse" a vehicle for narration, for emotional philosophy, for anything that requires sustained effects, which has never been surpassed. Mr. Stephen Phillips is perfectly right to tell his stories of "Endymion" and "The Quest of Edith," and his little tragedy of Iole in blank verse. And, setting blank verse aside, the irregular, rhymeless form adopted by Mrs. Woods for her "Nocturne in Westminster Abbey" called "The Builders" does undoubtedly help to convey the effect she desires—a sense of spacious mystery, a sense not so much of vagueness as of things rather imagined than seen in a darkness where natural and supernatural may meet. Under the "grey ascending arches":—

Far in their hollow night the glimmer of London
Is woven with texture of dreams, phantoms are there,
Vaguely drifting, as pale-winged wandering moths
Drift on the summer dark out of the abyss.

Who has beheld them, the feeling tenuous hands,
About the stone clinging, the carved crumbling
Work that they wrought ere they lay in forgotten
graveyards?

Poor blind hands!
As when sea-birds cling on untrodden ledges
And pinnacles of a lone precipitous isle
Or giant cliff, where under them all is mist
And the sullen booming of an unpeopled sea,
So do the phantoms cling on thy wind-worn ledges
And airy heights, thou grey isle of God.

Wail no more, blind ghosts, be comforted,
Ye who performed your work and silent withdrew
To your grand oblivion: ye who greatly builded,
Beyond the hand's achievement, the soul's message.

There is justification for the form in the impression it conveys. In "The Passing Bell," again, the same mystery is gained by the same means; and the regularly recurring phrase from the psalm which denotes the beat of the bell strikes with all the more force for its surroundings. But we should be sorry to see a fashion for the unrhymed lyric (a fashion due, possibly, to Matthew Arnold, but owing more, we cannot help suspecting, to Walt Whitman) growing into general use. Rhyme, it need hardly be said, is more than an ornament. It is no precious stone mounted in the gold, but a part of the very shape, and identity of the jewel. The unrhymed lyric is like a piece of soft metal; it becomes a jewel only when it has been worked upon, and the finishing touch, the final expression of its individuality, is rhyme. Except, in fact, in a very few definite instances, like the two poems by Mrs. Woods, an unrhymed lyric is an unfinished lyric. In "The Builders" and "The Passing Bell," we ought, perhaps, to except Mr. Phillips' "Midnight—31st of December, 1900," though here the poet has no actual dark place, like the inside of the Abbey, of which he wishes to convey the effect. But why should "William Ewart Gladstone" be unrhymed? and why "A Gleam"? and why "Thoughts in a Meadow"? The last two are lyrics, cries from the heart; and, good as they are, they lose much by being, in this manner, unfinished. When Mr. Trench gives us a set of six-line "Stanzas on Poetry" of which the first three lines rhyme together, and the last three rhyme with nothing, we cannot accuse him of want of finish. He has tried an experiment, and it has proved not only unsuccessful but tiresome.

Sing Valour, from the cradle to the pyre!
Sing thine own country's glories, grief and ire;
Hear thou the voice of every greenling briar;
And in thy song let all her words be temples,
Her rude heights and calm headlands clothed in foam
Nerve thee, and be within thee fortitudes!

Sing Love, and all that counteth not the cost;
And many a beautiful and unborn ghost
(Even as the ever-widening starry host
Steals from the luminous blue gulfs of evening)
Softly shall join your ring of auditors
Outside the silencers round the Tavern-rhyme!

Does not the ear crave for rhyme? And, cheated of it, does it not resent such experiments? If we scarcely venture the suggestion seriously—Mr. Trench intended by this means to symbolize what his muse tells him later in the poem—

Thy song shall be imperfect, never fair,
Seeing but the half, the half of it is here—

the reply must be that it is not the poet's vision, but his attention that is to blame.
Of the three Mr. Phillips is, perhaps, the one who gains the least from unrhymed poetry, because Mr. Phillips is the most certain and most accomplished poetic artist of the three—and not the most courageous thinker. The general level of both Mr. Phillips and Mr. Trench is high on the slopes; neither of them rises to the summit where it can be said that execution and intention are inseparable; and it is possible to draw a distinction between their methods of approach. The best of Mr. Phillips is not his thought nor his emotion, nor the interaction of both; it is his expression. He is content, as a rule, to take a good story or a respectable idea, and tell it with all the resources at his command. Those resources are an honest interest, clear, if limited, vision, a choice, though not very wide, vocabulary, and a mastery over his words and the sounds of his words which is remarkable, and only fails him when he tries to be absolutely simple. Giotto could draw a perfect circle without mechanical aid. When Mr. Phillips tries to do likewise he produces such lines as:

At times indeed it seems to me that I;
or:—

And aid me, when I cease to soar, to stand;
or:—

And I shall strive for thy white purity
For fear of everlasting losing thee;

lines which their context does nothing to enable. On the other hand, when his Iole is to die, like Iphigenia, for the host, he can put in to her mouth a master line like—

Now suddenly to leave the purple light
And go a ghost into a birdless grove.

And when Launcelot and Guinevere part he can dare an image like this—a challenge to the sense of incongruity which shrinks abashed before the challenge—

for he
Swooned in his burning armour to her face
And both cried out as the touch of spears:
And as two trees at midnight, when the breeze
Comes over them, now to each other bend,
And now withdraw; so mournfully those two
Still drooped together and still drew apart.

That Mr. Phillips can tell a story well no one needs to be reminded. The new book, as a whole, gives the impression that the poet has come to a pause in his development. The old

FORMER OCCUPANTS OF THE EDITORIAL CHAIR

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his retirement from federal affairs in 1882, when he was defeated on his return to his constituency, he had the satisfaction of seeing that his work on behalf of the dock had been successful.

The advocacy of the railway ferry project to Westminster was in reality the last question upon which the old "war-horse" came before the people of Victoria, and the failure of the public to accept this scheme as he saw it occasioned him no little annoyance and disappointment. It was in the hope of carrying through this pet project of his declining years that he offered himself as a candidate for the Dominion House, but his brief candidature on that occasion only demonstrated emphatically that his day was over. Subsequently his decline in strength was rapid, and with the failure of mental powers and the necessary appointment of guardians as a result, came the close of his brilliant, remarkable and unquestionably useful career.

Of the part he played in the making of British Columbia's history much might be said. He was not always right, nor was he at all times ready to concede that those who differed from him in opinion were actuated by the same honest motives which, to his credit, undoubtedly actuated him. He was a strong positive writer, and an equally emphatic speaker, making up for what he lacked in oratorical power, in precision of statement and fertility of argument—and these, with his immense fund of information on every public question, constituted him a powerful opponent in any debate. Conscientious, persistent, industrious, he was a man whose individuality would have forced him to the fore in any community. That he was a power for great good to British Columbia none will for a moment question or deny.

Mr. D. W. Higgins, who assisted very materially in moulding the destinies of The Colonist, is the fourth son of the late Wm. B. Higgins, a native of Manchester, England, who emigrated to Nova Scotia in 1814, and removed in 1836 to Brooklyn, New York. Educated in Brooklyn, Mr. Higgins went to California in 1856, where he soon afterwards founded the Morning Call newspaper. This he continued to publish up to his removal to this province in 1858. In October, 1862, he founded in Victoria the Morning Chronicle, a journal which was subsequently amalgamated with The British Colonist; the new paper taking the name of The Colonist and Chronicle, but reverting afterwards to the older title simply. He remained the owner and editor of The Colonist up to October, 1886, when he disposed of his interest therein and retired from journalism, after an almost unbroken editorial career of 31 years. In addition to his newspaper work, he served the public interest in other directions. He was for some years a member of the Victoria city council, a member of the school board, chairman of the board of education, president of the Victoria fire department, the president of the National Electric Tramway company, of the latter of which he was the chief promoter. Returned to the provincial legislature in 1886 for Esquimalt, he continued to sit therein until some four or five years ago. He was elected Speaker of the Assembly in 1890, again in 1897 and a third time in 1898. At present his time is fully occupied in looking after his private interests.

The late Mr. Henry Lawson, who was for eight years editor of The Colonist, died at his residence, Cook street, at 3 o'clock on the morning of January 10, 1897, after an illness of three weeks. The deceased was born in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, 67 years ago. His father, John Lawson, Q.C., was a well known legal practitioner in Charlottetown, originally from Halifax. His mother was Miss Fowle, an English lady. He received his early training at Charlottetown, and completed his education at Halifax, although as a matter of fact he left school at an early age, and was largely self-educated. As a youth he was a close student, a wide reader, and soon attained to a large measure of educational attainments. He at first chose for his profession that of teaching, in which he continued until appointed to the position of Deputy Collector of Customs at Summerside, P. E. I., during the incumbency of which office he also acted as arbitrator in connection with the purchase of right of way for the Island Railway. His great interest in educational matters, which he retained throughout life, again called him to the teaching profession, and for the period of three or four years he was Principal of the Charlottetown normal school, but a change having taken place in the island government, and a new administration coming into power, which adopted the spoils system of office, Mr. Lawson was, with other officials, removed, after which he turned his attention to journalism. This became his life work, and he pursued it for over forty years.

A man of sturdy views and wielding a strong and vigorous pen, he soon became recognized as a writer of conspicuous ability in his native province. He was offered and accepted, prior to Confederation, the position of editor to the Summerside Progress, and later became editor of the Charlottetown Patriot. For a number of years Mr. Lawson spent the seasons at Ottawa as a member of the Parliament press gallery, representing the Patriot, of which he became owner as well as editor. Finally, however, he sold the Patriot and moved westward, where the cities of the larger provinces opened up a broader sphere for his work. He became in turn a leader writer on the Toronto Globe, the Cornwall Freeholder, the Montreal Herald and Montreal Star. The various positions he occupied in the editorial field gave him a wide and varied experience in journalism, and brought him into contact with the leading men of Canada, thereby obtaining for him an insight into public affairs and large questions which well qualified him to occupy the editorial chair of The Colonist, a post he was offered and accepted in the fall of 1888.

His conduct of this newspaper and his editorial writings were ever characterized by sound judgment, a dispassionate treatment of public questions, and freedom from vituperation, recrimination and personalities. He was well and favorably known to a large number of Victoria's leading citizens, who felt deep regret at his death. As a man, although somewhat brusque in his manner, he was kind, warm-hearted, and generous. He was a man of strong domestic tastes. Mr. Lawson was married over fifty years ago to Flora McKenzie, of Prince Edward Island, and left, beside his widow, six daughters and three sons.

qualities are here, with a finer feeling than before for the point where enough has been said. He has mastered his materials; he can do almost what he pleases with words (for at the opposite extreme from the unrhymed lyric we find the old rhymed couplet used with not a trace of the prim finality which used to attend it); he is waiting now for some intellectual and emotional development that will complete his mastery over his materials and set him to work to adapt them to new purposes.

In Mr. Trench's new book (for it must be admitted that the evidence of "Deirdre Wedded" was all the other way) we seem to see that such a development has taken place. Mr. Trench is struggling to make his materials do more than he has been used to attempt with them, because his preoccupation is with more ardent and daring thought than before.

Apollo through the woods came down
Purred like a merchant fine,
And sate with a sailor at an Inn
Sharing a jug of wine.

But he would not stay nor tarry there
On the blithe edge of the dawn,
To the sea-coast his errand was
And the smoke-hanging town.

posed, qualities which not only earned for him the esteem and admiration of his friends, but entered into and dominated his professional duties. He was a man who possessed a wide range of exact information and wrote plainly and forcibly. His reasoning was clear and his conclusions sound. By long association with public men and experience in public affairs he had an intimate knowledge and a comprehensive grasp of Canadian politics in all its phases, and his judgment was rarely at fault in dealing with various and complex issues they arose. In his relations with those in whose service he wrought he was characterized by strict fidelity and unflinching devotion to their interests, and much of the success of The Colonist during his connection with its editorial management is due to his efforts. He maintained a high standard of journalistic ethics, and never descended to personalities or acrimonious and recriminatory discussion. His death will be generally regretted, and where his personality was not known his loss will be felt as that of one whose services to journalism were valuable. His constituency of readers was a wide and appreciative one.

After the death of Mr. Lawson the present editor of The Colonist was in charge for several years, and upon his retirement, David B. Bogle, a man of British birth, occupied the editorial chair for some time. Mr. Bogle, upon his retirement from The Colonist, left the province, and he is now engaged in an editorial capacity on the Winnipeg Telegram, where his trenchant pen contributes much that is of value to the interests of Manitoba and Canada generally. Mr. Bogle was succeeded by R. E. Gosnell, a native of Ontario, who withdrew in the autumn of 1906. Mr. Gosnell was for several years in the employ of the government, and the British Columbia Year Book is a monument to his industry, his knowledge of the province and his mastery of details. It is generally understood that he had much to do with the preparation of the case for the province in regard to Better Terms. He is the author of an excellent history of British Columbia, and has contributed to other publications. Mr. Gosnell is at present a resident of Victoria, and his many friends look forward to further products of his pen.

Far off he saw its harbours shine
And black sea-bastions thronged
With masts of the sea-travellers
For whom his spirit longed.

Far off he heard the windlass heaved
And the creaking of the cranes,
Gay barges halled and poled along,
And the rattling fall of chains,

Till by the windows of that Inn
He sate and took his ease
Where the bowsprits of the swarthy ships
Came thrusting to the quays.

Mr. Trench can do that, so to speak, with his left hand. A page or two further on we are deep in theology, philosophy, the life-force, and what not; and the materials are the same. We are still reading a ballad about a ship that went down, or, rather, a ship of which Apollo had

smote the great hull to a ghost
And the mighty masts to air;

and at the same time we are learning that personal immortality is an exploded idea, that Heaven and Hell (the masts and the hold of the ship) are abolished and that man has new sailing orders, new duty, new futurity. "The Ancient Mariner" and Coleridge's "fun" blended? To a certain extent. And the struggle to make means meet ends is not wholly successful; how should it be? The allegory,

Some eddy of the Infinite
Force on its way
Had caught that arm and moulded it
In mood of play;
That curve was of the primal Will
Whose gesture high
Waved forth the choir of planets, still
In ecstasy;
And the rhythm of its dreamed lines
Shall still flood on
Through souls beyond today's confines
When we are gone,
Shall bear to the unborn without name
The turned light
Secret as life, signal as flame,
And in that flight—
Vaster than Moon's or Apennine's
Sepulchral doors
When from the breathless gap of pines
Golden she soars—
To the fringed rock, dark-sunken, dumb,
Shall murmur, shall smile,
"Glorious the dance of passions! Come
To life awhile!
I. Beauty, travelling heaven on the hoar
Paint-phosphor'd wave
Of Being, charge ye to explore
And dare the grave!"

like most allegories, is harassed by the rival claims of the symbol and the thing symbolized. Yet, when Mr. Trench has been the round of the old and the new eschatology and has brought us back to a purely earthly and human little scene at the close, we feel that it has been a noble struggle, and so nearly successful that we may look with confidence for much greater work from the author in the future. He has a high courage; courage to think, and courage (though sometimes, indeed, it becomes the vis consili expers, which suffers its proverbial fate) to stretch his materials to breaking point in the effort to express himself. Let us take a passage from his "Ode to Beauty." Through a half-open door the poet has caught sight of a beautiful arm, with the hand holding a light.

That is "grandiose," as a painter would say, without being turgid; it is certainly not pedantic, yet it gives, in its place, a pretty exact idea of Mr. Trench's philosophy of beauty, which is his philosophy of life. Take him, on the other hand, in one of his "Stanzas to Tolstoi," and we find violent dissonance, unexpected and annoying assonance, turgidity, uncertainty, ruggedness, "jumpiness"—all the faults that arise when the struggle becomes too hard—

The Man upraised on the Judean crag
Captains for us the war with death no more,
His kingdom hangs as hangs the tattered flag
Over the tomb of a great knight of yore;
Nor shall one law to unity restore
Races or souls—no staff of thine can urge
Nor any backward summit lead them up;
The world-spring wherein hides
Formless the God that forms us, bursts its cup—
Is seen a Fountain—breaking like a flower
High into light—that at its height divides
Changelessly scattering forth—in blaze and shower—
In drops of a trembling diaphanity—
Dreams the God-breathings momentarily up-buoy
To melt a myriad ways. Those dreams are we,
Chanted from some unfathomable joy.

From this it is a delight to turn to "Killary," or "In summer time when Mary bathes," or "Almond, wild Almond"—to any of the lyrics that betray Mr. Trench's country of origin and show him at peace with himself; interesting as they are, not solely for their own beauty, but for the width of range and of sympathy which the very contrast shows the poet to possess.

Mrs. Woods we find at her best when she is stirred deeply in mind, as in the two poems we have mentioned above. Her "April," pretty and gay as it is, cannot compare with Mr. Phillips' "After Rain." The mood is the same neither poem aims at more than expressing the joy of the "spring-feeling"; but in such things Mr. Phillips' mastery gives him all the advantage. There is no single phrase, again, in Mrs. Woods's book that can compare with Mr. Phillips' "birdless grove"; nothing that can match his trees at midnight, or Mr. Trench's simile of a cathedral and a ship in "Apollo and the Seaman." But there are passages in "The Builders," unequal as it is, which strike home, and all of it is informed with a largeness of conception and a firm hope which give it greatness. "The May Morning and the Old Man" is a pure delight; "Rest" is exquisite. Yet, after all, we turn back inevitably to a poem which almost persuades us to renounce our plea for rhyme, so perfectly does its rhymelessness express the yearning that gave it birth, in spite of the vividness of the pictures it goes on to paint.

O that I were lying under the olives,
Lying alone among the anemones!
Shell-colored blossoms they bloom there and scarlet,
Far under stretches of silver woodland,
Frame in the delicate shade of the olives

O that I were lying under the olives!
Grey grows the thyme on the shadowless headland,
The long low headland, where white in the sunshine
The rocks run seaward. It seems suspended
Lone in an infinite gulf of azure.

Though we end with these unpatriotic thoughts, it is worth noting, and noting with joy, that all three of our poets are poets not of regret, but of courage. They face the present with all its conditions of heritage, nationality, waste, and trouble; they face the future, and they hope for it. Mrs. Woods may long for the olives, Mr. Trench may fly to his "dreamy, gloomy, friendly trees," each seeking awhile a locus refrigerii, lucis et pacis. But there is no shrinking aside, no renunciation of endeavor. The appeal to beauty is the appeal for life at its highest and fullest, not for an "aesthetic" refuge from the shocks of life. So much the better for these poets, and their readers, and the poets and readers to come.