

AN ABLE LECTURE

ON THE LATE HON. THOMAS D'ARCY MCGEE.

DELIVERED AT THE FINAL MEETING OF ST. PATRICK'S SOCIETY OF ST. MARY'S COLLEGE, BY THE PRESIDENT, MR. T. J. McMAHON, ON SUNDAY, 24TH MARCH, 1895.

Mr. McMahon opened his lecture by a most appropriate exordium, in which he referred to the recent celebration of Ireland's national day. Then, referring to the great men that the race produced, he illustrated a few of their noble qualities in the life and works of the subject of his lecture. Thus he continued;—

Thomas D'Arcy McGee was born at Carlingford, County Louth, Ireland, on the 13th day of April, 1825. His father, Mr. James McGee, was then employed in the coast-guard service, and his mother was a Miss Dorcas Morgan, of Dublin. Of his father he was wont in after life to speak with true filial affection and becoming reverence; but for his mother, whom he lost at a tender age, he seems to have had an especial regard. Of her he sings:—

"My Mother! at that holy name
Within my bosom there's a gush
Of feeling, which no time can tame,
A feeling which, for years of fame,
I would not, could not crush!"

She was highly educated, and he himself tells us that she possessed a fertile imagination and a cultivated mind, and we have every reason to believe that it was the teaching and influence of this dear parent that first awakened in his soul that spirit of poetry and patriotism that has since shed such an undying lustre on his name.

"We also perceive the teaching of this 'excellent mother in all the later poems of her son, which are invariably 'marked with a strong religious faith, 'together with a fervent piety, and a 'profound respect for religion and its 'ministers," says Mrs. Sadlier.

When but seventeen years of age we behold him emigrating from his native shores, resolved to carve a name for himself in the western world. He arrived in America, that land of his dreams, and where he was destined to take a leading part in so many stirring events, in company with his sister, in June, 1842. As an example of his Irish pluck and industry, we find among the list of orators who addressed the good people of Boston, on July 4, of the same year, the name of young T. D. McGee. From this day his rise was rapid. He was immediately offered, and he instantly accepted a situation on the Boston Pilot, and in two years time he became chief editor. His brilliant work in connection with this paper attracted the attention of the great O'Connell, and he was accordingly offered the editorial chair of the Dublin Freeman's Journal. Mr. McGee gratefully accepted this handsome offer; and thus we find our youth of 20, who had already made his mark as a writer and a public lecturer in America, taking his place in the front rank of Irish journalism. But it would seem that the tone of the Freeman's Journal was too moderate for his ideas, for he gladly accepted an offer of his friend Charles Gavan Duffy to assist him in editing the Nation in conjunction with Thomas Davis, John Mitchell, and Thomas Devin Reilly, the nucleus of the "Young Ireland" party.

The sad events that now ensued you all know: how the great Liberator died broken-hearted in a foreign land, and how, when that mighty tongue, whose counsels had sounded like a clarion through the land, was hushed forever in the stillness of the grave, and that master hand that had guided and directed the destinies of the Irish people in many a troubled hour, was chilled in the icy grasp of death. The famine-stricken peasants rose in fierce but futile rebellion under the "Young Irelanders." You know too that this flame of rebellion, like many another, was quenched by the life-blood of Ireland's best and bravest, and that Mr. McGee barely escaped by a hurried flight to America the fate that befel many another gallant son of Erin.

Upon his second arrival in America he again turned his attention to journalism, and published successively the Nation in New York, and the American Celt in

Boston. It was while engaged in the publication of this latter paper that he began to see the Utopian schemes of himself and his confederates in their true light, and that he underwent that great change of opinion which drew down upon him the implacable hatred of a certain class, and which was in the end the cause of his dastardly assassination. His early enthusiasm, too, for the United States and its institutions began to pale before the facts which stared him on all sides, and though it was with the greatest reluctance, Mr. McGee was at length led to the belief, as many besides him have been, that democratic institutions are far from being the best in the world.

Thus we find him in 1857, at the earnest solicitation of admiring friends in Canada, taking up his residence here in Montreal. In less than a year after he was elected, against all odds, as one of the three members for this city in the Dominion Parliament; and this seat he continued to hold to the day of his death. His subsequent career it would be useless for me to dwell upon. You all know how he became the most eloquent and at the same time one of the wisest and best of Canadian statesmen; how he laboured unceasingly for the union of the provinces, and at last, when he saw this, his great scheme, realized, how he defended that Union with the full powers of his matchless eloquence, even up to the very hour in which he fell, a martyr to his cherished opinions, by the foulest and most wanton murder that ever disgraced Canadian annals.

This, then, in a few words, is a sketch, but a very brief, and consequently a very imperfect one, of that great and good man, Thos. D'Arcy McGee. And what Canadian youth is there, I ask you, especially what Irish-Canadian youth is there, who, giving a thought to that brief but brilliant record, can doubt for one moment that the bearer of it is a man entitled to all honor and praise, and one who is worthy of the closest imitation? For when will there be found in the ranks of Canadian public men one of a more sterling character both in public and private? When will a more illustrious name be inscribed on the pages of our Canadian literature? Our when will Canadian history boast a more stainless patriot?

I say that his conduct in public and private was beyond reproach, nay, that it was spotlessly pure, and I say it without fear of contradiction. For although no means were left untried by those false friends of Ireland, whose base schemes assailed, to blacken his reputation in the eyes of the Irish people of Canada, and although they succeeded even so far as to cause his final assassination, nevertheless it was this horrible act itself that dispelled the mist from before their gaze and demonstrated Mr. McGee's true worth and the falsity of his enemies. Alas! yes; it was not till he fell that they recognized who was the true shepherd, and then they vied with one another in eulogizing the memory and swelling the mighty throng that followed to its lonely tomb on Mount Royal the corpse of him whom they knew not how to appreciate while alive, although he was ever their best and truest friend, their warm and staunch advocate, their faithful and fearless champion.

But although there were many who were thus led into false views concerning Mr. McGee's worth and motives, there were, nevertheless, at the same time, many grateful souls in the lower walks of life who frequently had secured a new lease of existence through his timely benevolence and many, too, who had risen from the lower walks, and owed their success to the assistance of his ever ready tongue and pen. For, like the late Sir John Thompson, he delighted in doing good by stealth, and was ever ready to help in any benevolent cause.

After drawing a comparison between the two statesmen in their private and public careers, as well as in their magnificent obsequies, the lecturer quoted, as applying to himself, those well-known lines of McGee:—

"His Faith was as the tested gold,
His Hope assured, not over-bold,
His Charities past count, untold,
Miserere Domine!"

And, like Sir John Thompson, Mr. McGee was a sincere Christian and a staunch Roman Catholic, and a spirit of generous loyalty to mother Church breathes through all his writings. No Catholic poet excels him in the praise of the Saints of God, and especially those

of his own race. St. Patrick, St. Brendan of the West, St. Comgall, St. Connack, the Navigator, St. Bride of Kildare and St. Columba of the Churches, all at times formed subjects upon which he poured out in a sweetly pious and venerating strain the wealth of his laudatory muse. "The Rosary," "Humility" and "First Communion," are other subjects into which he breathes the purest of Catholic spirit and sentiment. What more eminently religious than those two stanzas:

"Mighty our Holy Church's will
To guard her parting souls from ill,
Jealous of death she guards them still,
Miserere Domine!"

"The dearest friend will turn away,
And leave the clay to keep the clay.
Ever and ever she will say,
Miserere Domine!"

But his literary fame does not rest on his religious poems, although many of them are perfect examples of their kind. That he was a great poet no one will deny, and he is still greater when we consider that he never enjoyed the inestimable advantages of a collegiate education. We have the testimony of Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, the friend of his youthful days and companion in his early exploits, and the present eminent litterateur, who says of Mr. McGee:—

"His poetry and his essays' touch are 'like the breath of spring, and revive 'the buoyancy and chivalry of youth. 'What other man has the subtle charm 'to invoke our past history and make it 'live before us? If he has not served his 'mistress Ireland with the fidelity of a 'true knight, I cannot name anyone who 'has."

The London Athenaeum, speaking of Canadian poetry, said, many years ago, while he was still among the living,— "They have one true poet within their borders, that is Thomas D'Arcy McGee."

Though not so great a poet as Moore, he was nevertheless, to use the words of Mrs. Sadlier, who has edited his poems, more distinctively Irish, and derived his inspiration more directly and more exclusively from Ireland and her ancient race. In this quality also, I think, with the same eminent authority, that he is fully the equal of Davis. (the Dublin Nation called him the superior,) while in strong religious faith, the high appreciation of the beautiful and the good, he is by far the superior of both Moore and Davis, and therefore deserves more than either to be styled "The Bard of Erin." How like a lover does he sing of his dear—

"Ireland of the Holy Islands,
Belted round with misty highlands!"

And how naive his apology for his passionate outbursts,—

"Oh! blame me not if I love to dwell
On Erin's early glory;
Oh! blame me not if too oft I tell
The same inspiring story."

And what a manly, loyal outburst in—

"I'd rather turn one simple verse
True to the Gaelic ear,
Than classic odes I might rehearse
With senators listening near."

And this is exactly what he did, and it is for this reason that he is dear to the heart of every true Irishman.

Everywhere his poetry abounds in true poetic fancy, and the most delicate beauty of thought and expression.

In all branches of the art he was equally at home, and whether inspired by his deep filial affection for that dear lost parent to write,—

"For I would kneel at my mother's grave,
Where the pumy churchyard elms wave
And the old war-walls look down!"—

or by passionate yearning for his sweet young bride, to cry in his lonely exile:—

"My darling, in the land of dreams, of wonder
and delight,
I see you, and sit by you, and woo you all the
night.
Under trees that glow like diamonds upon my
aching sight,
You are walking by my side in your wedding
garments white!"—

or when his warm Celtic blood led him to chant in true Bardic style,—

"Gather together the nations, arouse and arm
the men!"—

we everywhere perceive the touch of the true poetic genius, and recognize the tones of a master singer.

But his poetry possesses another charm that endears it far more than anything else to the Irish Catholic heart, and that is its absolute purity of thought. We look in vain in any of his works for aught that would bring the blush to the cheek of the most innocent maid, and nowhere shall we find an author so free

from that immoral taint that so often mars the productions of the greatest intellects. If Ireland was his mistress and he her true and faithful knight, he has sung the praises of that mistress in tones befitting her traditional honor and stainless purity. Greater poets than D'Arcy McGee there certainly have been, but a purer, truer, and better there never was.

Nor was poetry the only branch of literature in which he excelled. While yet a boy he had acquired such a fame for himself as a brilliant editor, that his services were eagerly sought for by the best journals in the United States; his fame was wafted across the Atlantic, and in Ireland the great O'Connell was only too glad to secure for his Repeal movement what he was pleased to call "the inspired writings of a young exiled boy in America." He was the most popular of lecturers at a time when lecturing was at its best in this country, and his range of themes was most wonderfully extensive. "As a writer and essayist," to quote the words of the brilliant Mrs. Sadlier, "he equalled the best of our times, while as a truthful and painstaking historian he had few peers." His works of the latter variety were many and valuable, the chief among them being his "History of Ireland," which is universally admitted to be the best short history of Ireland yet written.

But it is probably as a great orator that Mr. McGee is best known. The politicians of thirty years ago still recall his eloquent periods, sparkling with Irish wit and humor, and in their ears they still hear the ring of the true Canadian patriotism and the firm belief in Canada's future greatness, that pervaded all his discourses. A trifling incident that came to my hearing some time ago will tend to show you what a hold had this first of Canada's orators upon the minds of the people, and also what a ready and natural speaker he was: A certain speaker who had come from another city to address an important political meeting, found to his consternation, upon his arrival at the meeting, that he had left his satchel containing all his notes and papers in the railway train. Without his notes he was completely at sea, so he told his audience of his mishap, and begged them to excuse him. I do not know whether they were all so severe on him, but a representative of the old school arose and told him he should carry his papers in his head like D'Arcy McGee, and not in a traveling-satchel, and he would never have occasion to disappoint the public. (Here Mr. McMahon repeated some eloquent extracts from McGee's speeches and then continued): Patriotism was the keynote of all his public utterances, speeches, addresses and lectures; it is the precious gem that glows on the pages of his historical works, and it was the "bright particular star" that guided all his public actions. It was this same inborn patriotism and love of freedom, too, which inspired him to write in one of his Canadian ballads:

"Let fortune frown and foes increase,
And life's long battle know no peace,
Give me to wear upon my breast
The object of my early quest,
Undim'd, unbrok'n and unchang'd,
The talisman I sought and gain'd,
The Jewel Independence!"

What patriot has sung the praises of his native land more faithfully, or more constantly, or more passionately than he? How true these words which he addresses to his mother Erin,—

"For never among your brightest,
And never among your best,
Was heart more true to Erin,
Than beats within my breast."

And again he says:

"A shell from the shores of Ireland is dearer
far to me,
Than all the wines of the Rhine-land or the
art of Italy."

The one prayer of his heart is,—

"O! merciful God vouchsafe that I
May see Ireland free—then let me die."

And again he was eternal fealty to that dear land, and calls down upon himself all manner of punishments,—

"If I ever cease to love thee,
If I ever cease to serve thee."

And truly vow was never more religiously kept, for it was but a few days before his death that he wrote his celebrated letter to the Earl of Mayo, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, pleading for better treatment of the land of his birth and its people. It was this letter which Mr. Gladstone afterwards quoted in support of his own schemes for the better