

Lecky says in his charming little work "Down at Caxton's," that as a sonnet writer Maurice Francis Egan stands easily at the head of the younger American school of poets. The writer of this brief study expressed the same opinion some four years ago in a letter which appeared in the *London Catholic Record*. It is pleasant indeed to know that one's judgment is not in error, for if there was any doubt as to the correctness of such criticism it is largely set at rest by an opinion lately offered by one of the most eminent critics in England "that Egan and the French sonneteer De Heredia are the two best sonnet writers living to-day."

It is often said by those who do not understand the true office and function of a sonnet, that a sonnet writer is a trifle. This is not so. The gift of writing first-rate sonnets belongs in general only to first-rate poets. Let us for a moment examine this fact. Who have been the great sonneteers of England? Here they are and you may judge of their place in literature: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Cowper, Wordsworth. And bringing the matter home who are our best sonnet writers in Canada? Are they not Roberts, Lampman, Reade and Archbishop O'Brien—not one of whom is an inferior writer? Among American poets, past and present, Longfellow, Egan, Gilder, Aldrich, and Fawcett may, I think be taken as representative of the best.

Now a word as to the history, function, and form of the sonnet before I enter into an appraisal of Mr. Egan's round of pearls, so that there may be no doubt that our author fulfils in form, thought, and artistic development all the conditions required in a true sonneteer.

The sonnet first bloomed under Italian skies, or speaking accurately, under Sicilian skies, making its appearance in the thirteenth century, a century by the way rich in glorious creations of almost every kind. The Italian genius and temperament are peculiarly suitable for sonnet writing and we find that during the centuries which followed its birth in the garden of Italian song, the greatest singers of Italy, Dante, Petrarch, Michael Angelo, and Tasso did not disdain to make it the vehicle of the loftiest thought as well as the tenderest and most impassioned emotions.

During the sixteenth century when the classical breath of Italy was sweeping across the daisy-clad meadows of England, the sonnet was first planted in the garden of English song, and nurtured by the courtly hand of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who was judicially murdered in 1546 by that spot of blood and grease on the page of English history, Henry VIII., not, however, on the charge of writing bad sonnets. Under English hands down the centuries the Petrarchan sonnet changed its form, the Shakesperean sonnet being made up of three quatrains in which the alternate lines rhyme, and a rhyming couplet. The Miltonic sonnet differs again from both the Petrarchan and Shakesperean. Here are the chief conditions of an ideal Italian sonnet which for our purpose may be designated normal. In the first place it must consist of fourteen lines, neither more nor less. These again must be distributed into two groups or systems; the major group consisting of the first eight lines which should be complete in themselves; and then the minor group, of the six concluding lines. Again, the first eight lines should have only two rhymes, and these distributed