

# THE AUTHOR OF THE HABITANT.

(By Maurice Casey, in University of Ottawa Review.)

It would not be easy to make an exaggerated estimation of the regret that almost universally pervaded, not only the people of Canada and the United States, but also those of far distant countries, wherever the English language is spoken, when the doleful news of the unexpected death of William Henry Drummond, M.D., the most faithful delineator of French-Canadian life and customs, was made public through the instrumentality of the press. The mournful announcement spread over the civilized world like the gloomy shadow of night. The reason for this general and widespread grief, a rare tribute of sincerity to a dead poet in this materialistic age, is not difficult to discover, and it will, the writer ventures to hope, make the graphs wherein the attitude which the lamented writer maintained toward several matters of note, is succinctly indicated, chiefly by his own pen.

I first met the author of "The Habitant" at his residence in Montreal early in 1896. He stood before me the very embodiment of perfect manliness. Well grown, large of frame, with firm step, and an open, yet dignified, deportment, he would have been singled out anywhere in a crowd.

Like David, he had "a beautiful countenance and goodly to look at." His features were regular and handsome, his forehead high and broad and his dark eyes illuminated by the fire of genius. The flush of health on his sunburned cheek testified to his abiding passion for the life in the open; by meandering stream with rod and line, or in solitary forest shades with fowling piece and lure of the wilderness. After

searching on many topics in our talk we finally settled down to a discussion of the Irish poets, both the living and the dead. He named Sir Samuel Ferguson as his prime favorite, and proceeded to place him on the throne of supreme modern Irish poetic genius. I ventured to state some of the claims of Thomas Moore to such exalted position, but without effect, although the critics are on my side. Then I hinted that the Doctor was partial to his fellow north of Ireland man, and, to show the error of the contention, he highly praised James Joseph Callaghan, and declared James Clarence Mangan to have been "the mystery-making Edgar Allan Poe of Ireland."

Passing on to Irish-American poets, the Doctor chose the Rev. Abram Ryan for the highest place in his estimation. On my making a reference to John B. O'Reilly, the Doctor warmly declared that "he was a profound and sane thinker, like Thomas D'Arcy McGee, and could, when at his best, evoke a captivating music."

What surprised me most in all this was the astounding amount of Irish poetry that the Doctor had by heart. While speaking about Sir Samuel Ferguson, for example, he recited page after page of his best poetry, without a single reference to a book. Callaghan's tuncful "Gougana Barra" he repeated entire, "out of his own head," as the children say, with a power I have never heard equalled. Father Ryan's "Song of the Mystic," and also his pathetic "Rest," were beautifully rendered without the aid of the printed page. He ended his charming entertainment by quoting copiously from O'Reilly, and highly praised the eulogy of Wendell Phillips, whom the Doctor, with a twinkle in his eye, declared "was good enough to have been Irish born."

At length, when the Doctor grew weary of reciting Irish poetry for an audience of one, he suddenly arose and strode over to a window that opened on to a yard. Beckoning me to his side, he pointed proudly to two dogs, crouched on either side of the burrow. "They are Irish terriers," he explained, "and they will stay there at their post without bit or sup till the enemy appears, and then we betide it. It would be well for the Irish race if they possessed more of the grim determination of their terriers!" The latter sentiment was uttered with a solemn tone and look but seldom absent for long from the Doctor's manner, and this pensive gravity is, I believe, characteristic of most humorists.

A year subsequently I happened to be alone with the Doctor while he stood on the Interprovincial Bridge at Ottawa, and drank in the beauties of the Chaudiere Falls. "Do you still believe in Moore?" he suddenly asked, turning about to me. I answered in the affirmative sturdily enough. "Then you can not understand that," he exclaimed, and he

pointed toward the mighty torrent, with all the impressiveness of an Egyptian priest before the sacrificial altar. I considered it to have been one of those occasions when a laugh helps out, and as I replied, "The more I know of Moore the more I am pleased with the music of falling water, or any other sort of music." It speaks volumes for the Doctor's good nature that he actually laughed at the fatuous pun.

In a letter the doctor wrote to me about this time he gives what he would probably have called the reason of his literary method. "You ask if I have ever written upon a serious subject," he wrote, "Well, I scarcely know if I have or not. So many choose this style and do so well that maybe the fact has the grain," as it were. I seldom feel really serious enough; my digestion is so good, you know. Another thing, I start in only when I am in the humor—in that way, too, I'm very irregular—but if there's one vein I would delight in it is the "roasting vein"; it's only trouble is it gets people down on one so; then I see visions of law-suits and lawyers, that are worse, and they scare the life out of me; so, you see, my poetic taste is 'low' and of the 'lamp pouring' and, therefore, not to be encouraged. But there's some excuse, for Great heavens! how low the world is of shame, both sexes! and the gift of William Makepeace Thackeray and the 'o'er acid, but also gifted, Thomas Carlyle, never detested shame more than does your humble servant." In effect, the Doctor wrote humorously, and had the good sense to follow his natural bent.

In another letter I find a passage containing more truth than poetry. Here it is: "It's all very well for men like President Eliot, of Harvard University, to talk as he did before an Irish audience the other day, and assure them that no bigotry or hatred of the Irish race exists in 'liberty-loving Massachusetts.' What rot! Look at the American papers and see how the Irish are maligned—caricatured. You have never seen anything like it in an English comic paper or magazine. They are decent on the other side of the water." This letter contains more in the same strain, but want of space prohibits further citation here.

He writes of a poem I liked and sent to him: "Pretty little thing that of Miss Perry, 'Riding Down,' very pretty; I have copied it." Indeed, his invariable habit was to copy in his legible, beautiful chirography the passage in his reading that took his fancy. Generally, by the time the lines were written out, they were, I imagine, indelibly stamped on his memory.

Poor Drummond never went largely into his own merits and achievements, and very seldom into the demerits and shortcomings of his contemporaries; his whimsically expressed desire for "roasting" notwithstanding. The following bit of sharp criticism of a pretentious volume of verse published about the time he wrote has a value aside from the subject that suggested it: "Have you ever read —'s poems? I essayed the task, but their effusions are clearly not for me. They are far too stilted—too rhetorical. They want heart and they want soul. Candidly, little of what passes for Canadian poetry will survive many years. But the little—the exception—is really good, and when Johnny Canuck shall have amassed sufficient wealth to enable him to rest 'under his own fig tree' from driving logs and piling lumber he may do some great things. This is the way in all history. Elegance and refinement are always the last effort of opulence and leisure."

Soon after the receipt of the foregoing was given a lengthy epistle from the same mind pen. The letter fairly brimmed over with laudation of the verse of Moira O'Neill, the poet of the storied glens of Antrim, a writer also beloved of Kate Douglas Wiggin, the diverting author of "Penelope's Irish Experience." Dr. Drummond enclosed a written copy of Miss O'Neill's poem, "The Little Son," concerning which he enquired, "Where will you find anything so pure and tender?" For the mischief of the thing, my reply was that generally well-stone blind to the defects of anything emanating from his native north of Ireland, but, in the present instance, I added, I did not consider that he was wrong, at least not entirely so. He responded on a pictorial postcard, containing an illustration of the "Walls of Derry," and a line to the effect that "A little Moore of that would be too much." My re-

joinder to this unexpected echo of my poor pun of long ago was a warning that the making of puns was considered by all respectable folks as conduct little short of punishable. And so the whole joke passed in laughter. Another letter contains the following sentences and highly characteristic passage, with which I must close, having already overrun my allotted bounds: "I had an 8-page (large) letter from M— yesterday, all about dogs, and mostly dealing with the Irish terrier; so I must have given him quite a lecture on the subject of 'Hibernian ratters' the other day! You know they consider me a sort of authority on the I. T. I'll make you a present of an Irish terrier in the spring, with a pedigree dating from the time of Strongbow."

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- (1) At least six months' residence upon and cultivation of the land in each year for three years.
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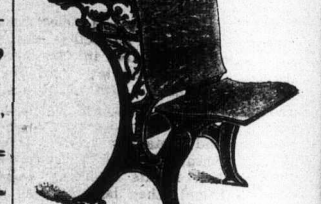
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"And how did you know?" "Because if you weren't, wouldn't be a stop-mother. She pondered it and smiled. 'But perhaps some day,' she said, hesitatingly, 'I may get one, too.'"

"No, you can't," he unhesitatingly declared. "When you start you are given your choice you are going to be. And you young, I must say, to have on the wrong road."

"I am ten years older than she put it, differently. 'Ten! Pouff! that's nothing. I was eight years old. I stood upon a footstool, looked down at her. There was a which presently she said, 'Then as you are much wiser now, I expect you would like to teach me things I know.'"

"You're certainly very ignorant," he remarked. "But I am willing to learn. He found her sweetest little. Most grown-up people scorned for being rude."

"Oh, well, if you are will learn," he said, "there may be some. What shall we with?" "First, I want to know your mother would do if she I away for a long time and he come back home to her little. 'I don't know anything about little boys,' he said, you happen to mean a chap."

"Yes, that's it," she corrected quickly; "I mean a chap you." "What's that the good?" he looked at her searchingly. And then you'd have given me at once, and if you haven't can't."

Trusting his hands into his, he whistled as he turned. "I'm afraid I don't quite what you are talking about."

He wheeled round suddenly. "I'm talking about chocolate." "Oh, yes, of course, I am. They are in my bag. Will you take it? Thank you."

He was all gleefully now. "These are from Paris and are from London. I did not know you might like best." "I'll try them both," said there was another pause.

"And the next thing I want to tell me," continued Mrs. Lagon presently, "is what book would a real mother have to her son, if he was a like you?"

His expression denoted approval. "You are getting on!" "I felt sure I should get on, would help me."

"Oh, that's all right. You're really welcome. I like these chocolates. Let's have a look at books."

"I expect you have got lots of your own already." "Oh, no! I haven't. Not enough. And none of the sort like. I'm sick of death of godmothers and wicked step-mothers and butterflies, and lambs, and something real and true about men who did great deeds."