

CANADIAN ESSAYS.

ENGLAND'S BARDS.

BY JOSEPH K. FORAN.

WE might say that until the fifteenth century no great poet, and consequently no great poem can be found in England. It is very remarkable that each particular country has had its own particular era of literature. In France the great age of letters was the seventeenth century—afterwards the eighteenth century was somewhat famous, but at its best it was merely the evening of that glorious day. In England also there are a couple of periods marked out in her history more by the works of the pen than of the sword. And strange to say, they correspond almost to the year with the great epochs of French and European literature. They are the end of the sixteenth and whole of the seventeenth centuries and after a lapse of a hundred years the end of the eighteenth and the commencement of the nineteenth centuries.

In the fifteenth century we find the first germs of true English poetry in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Truly they are in the old saxon—but that old saxon is here. It may present certain difficulties to the reader of our day, but it likewise presents most charming hidden beauties. Even as the sweetest-smelling rose—the most delicate of flowers—is to be found in the thickest of briars—so the most elegant ideas of Chaucer are half hidden beneath those olden expressions. He alone marks the age in which he lived.

Chaucer's efforts seemed to have inspired the only four famous poets of the sixteenth century—(we mean the commencement of the 16th.) Richard Barnfield and Richard Allison touched the lyre, and in pastorals and minor poems opened out a new era in that branch of literature. With them we find Thomas Caren, whose delicate rhymes and gem-like thoughts are only equalled by the glorious productions of Edmund Spenser.

Here we might remark that Spenser was the first English poet who left his native shore to seek inspiration in the

beauties of other lands. And it was to Ireland Spenser went, at Kilecolman Castle in a Munster valley by "the silver snir that flows through fair Clonmel," as he sings, Spenser penned his masterpiece of poetry, his *Fairie Queen*.

From Spenser's day we notice an advance in the art of poetry—even in proportion to the development of the nation's resources, the extension of her commerce and the triumphs of her arms. Robert Herrick, though inferior to Spenser is a connecting link between him and Ben. Jonson, of whom it is unnecessary to speak, and who in his turn was but the aurora of that glowing sun about to appear towards the close of the sixteenth century upon the sky of England's literature, in the person of William Shakspeare.

The iron had been warmed by those we have mentioned; it was reserved for Shakspeare to mould it into shape. In the ode, the lyric, the drama,—in every species (save one) of poetry he triumphed. In ten years he made a name immortal and gave to Europe the Spectacle of the greatest bard alive—or perhaps that ever did or ever will live. Each one of his dramas could be made the subject of an essay. But such is not our object—we merely wish to follow the history of the country and show how there are different epochs when a nation triumphs, if not on the field of blood at least in the arena of the ruined.

Shakspeare's star had not made the half of its course, when in the east a meteor arose more powerful but not so varied and delicate. Through Shakspeare England carried her name amongst those of other nations upon the tables of literary fame. But Troy, and Greece, and Rome, and Italy, and Germany had their Epic poems. France as yet was without such a monument, England likewise was wanting in that single object. It was reserved for John Milton to supply that necessary. And how did he do it?

It would seem as if all the efforts of the epic poets of ages were but so many models, whereon the epic poet of the seventeenth century should build his mighty structure. The *Odyssey* of Homer is filled with beautiful and noble descriptions of battles and deeds of arms; the *Æneid* of Virgil contains romance