

Francis Thompson Mystic and Poet.

Dr. Wilfred Meynell, the English editor and reviewer, husband of Alice Meynell, poet and essayist, discovered the late Francis Thompson and reclaimed him when he was wandering in poverty and misery in the streets of London, says a writer in the Catholic Universe. He placed the poet in surroundings where his genius could best express itself, gave him friends, encouragement, and such appreciation and sympathy as can reach a mind as remote from the common interests of men, as mystical in its visions, as profound in its insight as that of Francis Thompson. Convinced that no one could write with so much authority of the dead poet, regarded by discriminating critics as the greatest of his time, the following extracts from an appreciation by Mr. Meynell in last week's Collier's have a special interest.

Francis Thompson is no more—all that is mortal of him. That was not much. His so-called fame weighed but five stone when borne in a London cab from his lodging to the Hospital of St. John and St. Elizabeth some ten days before St. Elizabeth some ten days before the end, and when a specious "lift" capable of raising him to the ward tonnage, upbore him to be a "paying" in which he was to be a "paying" guest, and to pay nature's last debt, his bodily levity seemed, well, debt, his bodily levity seemed, well, almost burlesqued. What was all this only for me and the attendant white-robed nun? Surely, one thought, this moth of a man, all thought, whose spirit has soared at will into the Seventh Heaven, must be able to rise at will; he, if any, must be capable of levitation, that power of poise in the air possessed by the saints he had all his life saluted—by St. Ignatius of whom he had left behind a memoir in manuscript.

But we were already at our ward, and Francis Thompson, docile as a child, divested himself—what was left of himself—of his outward garments, and sank with a sigh of relief into the narrow bed, in which he was to die. But he did not divest himself of quite everything. There was a medal around his neck—a Catholic emblem tied with a piece of not too cleanly string. This he kept through his ten days' delay with us—his worn fingers often assuring themselves that it was safely there. In his other hand he held fitfully the book of a popular living humorist. His time at the end of his tragedy of life he craved light comedy. I think "Many Carriages" bore its strangest and noblest freight when it helped Thompson through that last passage.

It is nineteen years since a little roll of manuscript was posted to an editor at Charing Cross by a man with all the outward appearances of a tramp. His clothes were ragged; his features had the stamp of privation. The paper, too, on which the verses were written was "not too cleanly"—like the poet's "not too cleanly stable" of Bethlehem. Pearls dwell in the fetid gutter, and these soiled sheets held the purest poetry. The happy editor made haste to discover the writer. He sought to waylay him by day in the streets, and at a certain chemist's in Drury Lane; and by night under London's sheltering archways in London's dismal rain. At last the wanderer was found. Little by little we learned that Francis Thompson was the son of a doctor in Lancashire had been educated at Ushaw College, near Durham—the college of Charles Waterton, where he had nearly become a priest, and at Owen's College, Manchester, where he had never nearly become a doctor, though that was what he had been sent there to become. Be sure his failure distressed and perplexed his father, who saw, not as we see, the genius, but only the apparently rebellious boy. Hidden from that parent were the heart and brain of his own conceiving. The people about no more suspected his power than the man in the street, seeing the tramp posting his soiled envelope, guessed that what bulged the bedraggled coat pocket were two books—"Echylus" and "Blake." They did not know, as he knew, that he labored under what he called

"Of destitute verse."

So he found himself in London streets, as Dr. Quincey did, and began, at that early time, to doctor himself disastrously with laudanum to palliate the miseries of his mind.

and the pangs of disease—consumption—of which he finally died. Laudanum made of Francis Thompson an exile through all the rest of his life; but an outcast never. He bore a fine dignity through every assault of bodily vicissitudes.

When Browning saw some of these first verses of Thompson's, he at once pronounced them "extraordinary," and expressed a "confident expectation" of the poet's success, and this, although Browning, very shrewd as he was, lacked Thompson's celestial vision; and, knowing as he was, yet did not know the things pertaining to spiritual imagination. But that was Thompson's luck—to be so richly endowed that, if you missed him in what you thought was his essential greatness, you yet found in his mere byways and blind alleys riches enough and to spare. It has been well said that the images he rejected would have made the fortune of any other half dozen poets of his time.

"Sister Songs" was the second of Thompson's books. The "Poems," published two years earlier—in 1893—sufficed by themselves for his fame. They taught at once at the heart of the lover of English poetry. Vision and thought found expression worthy of them; unlike his poor self, a soul in an unfit tenement, a mere conduit pipe, as he called himself, "running wine of song." The phrasing was glorious—transfiguring. The "Love in Dian's Lap" section, which Coventry Patmore rather mildly said that Laura would have envied, showed Thompson's sonship to Dante, and added another name to those of the troubadours of Fair Love, passionately pure—to the high company of Crasshaw, Patmore and Rossetti. The poems to children, "Daughter," "Poppy," "Monica Thought Dying," and the rest, give a new experience even to the expert in child lore. That these song children will live forever, I gather that he knew, for, speaking "To my godchild, Francis M.," he says in noble numbers:

"And when immortal mortal droops your head,
And you, the child of deathless song, are dead,
Then, when you search with unaccustomed glance,
The ranks of Paradise for my countenance,
Turn not your tread along the Uranian sod.

Among the bearded counselors of God,
For, if in Eden as on earth are we,
I sure shall keep a younger company.
Pass the crystalline sea, the Lam-pads seven,
Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven!"

The "Poems" include "The Hound of Heaven," that pursuit of the fleeing soul by Christ which moved Burns-Jones more than any other poem, "since Gabriel wrote his 'Blessed Damozel,'" and the reading of which made him dress himself again after he had gone to bed, so great was the abstraction and perturbation the poem caused.

In the "New Poems" Thompson preached more starkly his gospel of renunciation for those who would find favor from the Mistress of Vision:

"Pierce thy heart to find the key,
With these take
Only what none else would keep;
Plow thou the rock until it bears,
Die, for none other way canst live."

The poet had enjoined his godson to seek for him "in the nurseries of Heaven," and we counted it a strange and even comforting coincidence that when we had chosen his grave in the "blear necropolis" of London, we saw a seemingly vacant plot of greenery adjoining it; and, on inquiry, were told it was named "Holy Innocents' Ground," being planted with the bodies of unrecorded babes. So now he and they share the same cold playground, these unnamed children and this child of genius whose name shall stand forever. Flowers laid with him in his grave, George Meredith's roses, violets, grown in a kindred turf, from the lady of "Love in Dian's Lap," bay leaves from his muck-song Monica; these were frail symbols of the laurels on his "unwithering brow."

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The Present Position of Catholics.

More than half a century has passed since Cardinal Newman delivered his famous "Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England." The label was one that even a decade of years was bound to render antiquated; for the Present is transformed to the Past under our eyes, and the Cardinal himself lived long enough to see the contents of his addresses so far out of date as to justify that honest warning of impending staleness which his very title-page conveyed. Looking back to-day on the picture of the Catholic position as he saw it, we may feel that the Cardinal showed his accustomed acumen even in the transiency of his title-page. Moreover, helped by two such volumes as now lie at hand—The Catholic Directory of 1908 and The Catholic Who's Who—we may estimate the more easily the great advances made by Catholics in the fifty years that have intervened.

The material increase is told in the vast multiplication of churches and convents, a familiar tale, and one we may fairly hope, that stands for a growth of things spiritual answering to the growth of things temporal. The Catholic Directory has lived long enough to be a witness of this great revival. It was there when it had to record by only hundreds the institutions that Bishop Johnson now reckons by thousands. And the other volume, newer though it be, bears a witness not less apt because so personal—a witness which Cardinal Newman would have been the first to welcome had he lived to see it. When, at a period midway between the present date and that of his lectures, a list of "Rome's Recruits" was first tentatively printed in a newspaper, it gained at his hands its warmest greeting. For the Cardinal held that the number and significance of the names would tend to lessen the public prejudice that had accustomed itself to account Catholics men all of one mould, and that the meanest. And if the mere accessions to the Church scattered to the winds that idle proposition, how utterly vain does it become in face of this fuller roll-call of Catholics—those that were born to the purple no less than those who trod themselves the thousand paths that lead to Rome, the Catholics not of these islands only, but of all the Empire, and no mere enumeration of names but biographies, which, brief as they are, indicate the presence of adherents of the old religion in every department of the national life in which character counts and talents tell.

If there is one passage more clinging to the memory than another in the Cardinal's lectures, it is surely that in which he depicts the Catholic as an alien, if not an outcast, in the eyes of his Protestant fellow-countryman. He was himself almost in touch with the times when the "Romanist" was regarded as a "freak"; when his "chapel" was hidden away behind heavy and often misleading doors in a blind alley, and when the priest offered to non-Catholics this only alternative—was he a knave or was he a fool? That is all ancient history now. The last fifty years in particular have been at work to break down those insensate barriers. The priest has been the Protestant's colleague on the School Board; he has sat beside him on emergency committees of all kinds in times of peril and privation; he has relations with him in private life. The tide of conversions has swept round all our coasts, and the very treasure that calm waters never yield. If as Catholics we have a right to a Catholic who's who of our own, as Englishmen we are none the less part and parcel of the nation in its best aspirations and ideals. There is nothing foreign about us except what is accidental. The casual taunt of Archbishop Benson when he calls us "the Italian Mission" is best rebutted by the accession to that same mission of his own son. The first name on the list of The Catholic Who's Who—a very English name it is too—is that of Mr. Arthur A. Beckett, who, like Mr. Louis Garvin, Mr. Richard Davey, Mr. Harold Sponder, and others in the book—not for a moment forgetting its editor, Sir F. C. Burnand himself—have distinguished themselves in that peculiarly English institution—an untrammeled and an unsubsidized press. In many another department of its amusements and its instructions has the great British public been beholden to Catholics. It lends a listening ear to the voices of Patti and

Santley, and its music is made for it by Elgar. If it wants a great cathedral built it comes to Mr. Gilbert Scott for the design even as Chelsea goes to Mr. Leonard Stokes for its town hall. Every British Army itself finds in a Catholic lady its favorite Himmer. The

side what Catholics have done to accustom themselves to the great public that reads serious literature—and no one who has followed Lord Acton's appreciation of George Eliot will deny to novels an inclusion in that grave category. Among the surprises of the Who's Who list—and these will be many to most of us—none will be more frequently encountered than that of the entry which secures to us this or that famous name in current literature. The poets, on Mr. Chesterton's reckoning, we may there expect to find; for the poets love symbols, and symbols are everywhere accessory. Fire and after the fact, to the Catholic faith; and perhaps it is natural too, that the writer of the story that is first cousin to the parable should be led instinctively, and with a quickened sense of interpretation, to the parables of Him who without a parable spoke not unto those about Him.

And the familiarity thus engendered between Catholics who write and Protestants who read dovetails naturally into another friendly traffic between minds and affections labeled religiously apart. For writers have often an hereditary fame; and Mrs. Harrison commends her creed, not merely as the author of her own books, but as the daughter of Charles Kingsley. Agreeably to the formula already used for Archbishop Benson, Charles Kingsley gave us flouts and gibes, but, also, for our friend, a daughter, who found, as time proceeded and events unfolded, in that very Church which he assailed the logical resting-place for feet that he had speeded on their path towards truth. It is this marvelous fusion of names that are household names in England with a creed it was once in fashion to earmark alien that gives point to Sir Francis Burdett's dedication to King Edward VII. of this transfigured Debutant of Catholicism. We can imagine his Majesty pausing over page after page containing names that belong to the Catholic Church to-day but that also belong, from past association, to the whole nation, as indeed does—that of his own niece, the Queen of Spain. England's greatest Parliamentary boast is that of her pioneer part in the emancipation of the slave; and, behold, there are in the world now more Catholics than Protestant descendants of William Wilberforce. All Byron's descendants are Catholics, and Catholic is the line of Walter Scott. Those of Stevenson's kith and kin nearest to him among the men of the succeeding generation are of the religion of Father Damien whose name he has enshrined in our literature. Lockhart and Bulwar, Henry Taylor and Arnold, each ray of England's literary soil, are represented on these lists. Dickens is there in the direct line, and Thackeray there by collaterals. As if all that was not English enough, the little Lords Trafalgar of the future will be winning their battles on the playing-fields of Beaumont or Downside for Earl Nelson's son, Lord Merton and his brother, have boarded the barque of St. Peter—a feat of spiritual seamanship not unworthy of the name of Nelson. Another point worth mention in this connection will strike the observant reader. There is one great office of State, other than the King's own, closed against Catholics in this country, the Lord Chancellorship. But there is hardly a page of this blue-book that does not offer us at its first coming some fascinating points of speculation or research, of romantic hope or of fulfilled congratulation; and we find ourselves at the end of our space while only at the beginning of our theme.—The London Tablet.

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