

Why Poets Have a Patriotic Duty to Perform

Mr. Alfred Noyes Declares That War Poems Help to Quicken the National Spirit and That No Able-Bodied Englishman Can Resist the Appeal of These Lines by Kipling:-----

By Alfred Noyes.

Most Distinguished of England's Younger Poets.
(In an Interview.)

WHERE poetry has helped or hindered either side in this war I feel quite certain that it is the poetry of the past more than of the present. Poems, in order to be of any real assistance to bullets, must share in the artistic perfection of bullets. Bullets are not created on the spur of the moment; neither are the sort of poems which infuse a whole nation with unconquerable valor. Both are the result of experience, ripened knowledge, preparation, deliberate craftsmanship.

Every true poet understands this. When extraordinary occasions tempt him into spontaneous production he is apt to be sorry ever after that he yielded; though in a case like the present, when his country is suddenly involved in war, he really has no choice. If he is a poet whose views are at all recognized he is expected to express them.

The effect of these war poems, if any, is indirect. They help to quicken the national spirit. Over here in America the impression exists, I am told, that Rudyard Kipling's poem, "For All We Have and Are," was splendid propaganda for the War Office. They say that it placed added thousands in line at the recruiting stations. Yes, I think "propaganda" is the right word. What able-bodied Englishman could resist the appeal of the first four lines?:

"For all we have and are,
For all our children's fate,
Stand up and meet the war,
The Hun is at the gate!"

No living poet is safer with posterity, as with contemporary readers, than Mr. Kipling is. But "The Hun is at the gate," as he very well knows, has nothing to do with his reputation as a poet. As a poet Mr. Kipling is distinguished for his originality. As a poet he would not paraphrase Byron's line:

"The Mede is at the gate!"

Or be beholden to "Belshazzar" for his rhythm and form. Nobody can

deny, however, that as a patriot-propagandist-poet Kipling scored heavily with "For All We Have and Are."

Most of the recognized poets of England, during the early days of the war, evidently felt this way about it, for they expressed their views in different forms of their art—mostly proper and worthy views, but more or less inartistically expressed, owing to haste and lack of perspective. From the art standpoint I probably am as guilty as the others. Though I had been called a pacifist, and had a smaller audience, probably, than some of my comrades, I felt it my duty to enact a role in which I had some recognition and address my countrymen on the burning question of the hour.

As a poem, perhaps that contribution is not worse than many others similarly inspired—but it will not be included in any future volume of my poems.

Many of these war poems were published simultaneously in England and America. If you have given the matter any attention, doubtless you have noticed that the great bulk of these poetic expressions appeared during the first two weeks following the shock of the first general knowledge that war was inevitable. It was this shock that stirred the patriotism of the poets. In ordinary conditions they had been simply poets. You might say that now they were patriots first and poets secondarily. But no sooner had they performed their duty as patriot-poets than their art standards were to the fore again, and they realized that the great poems about this war would not be written until the war was long over. Accordingly the output of war poetry suffered a sharp decline.

Probably it is true that if exactly the right kind of poem should reach every soldier in the trenches at just the psychological moment, it would have a material bearing on the fortunes of war. Armies are not beaten until they feel that they are beaten. Such a poem, suddenly ringing in the

ears of the whole army at a decisive moment, might raise its spirits and courage to a pitch that would insure victory. Or, it is conceivable that a poem of the opposite tendency, fired unerringly into the ranks of the enemy, might so convince him of the error of his ways that he would turn and flee for very shame. But so far as I can see, poets of that calibre are yet to arrive.

In my opinion, the best of all the short poems thus far inspired by the war is almost the worst in respect to its misrepresentation of realities. I refer to William Watson's sonnet entitled: "To America Concerning England." It is admirable art—but do you Americans believe that at this date the people generally of any part of the civilized world consider the situation to be as Mr. Watson's poem takes it for granted? The last six lines point the error as to facts: "Neutrality! The Tiger from his den Springs at thy mother's throat, and canst thou now Watch with a stranger's gaze? So be it then. Thy loss is more than hers, for bruised and torn She shall yet live without thine aid, and thou Without the crown divine thou might'st have worn."

Such expressions are not logical, nor do they voice any general feeling. Still more illogical and opposed to reality is the most venomous poem which the war has brought forth—that German production called, "A Chant of Hate Against England." It is not true that the German people hate the English people any more than it is true that the English people hate the German people. Yet this poem assumes to speak for the German nation in such lines as these:

"YOU will hate with a lasting hate. We will never forego our hate. Hate by water and hate by land, Hate of the head and hate of the hand, Hate of the hammer and hate of the crown, Hate of seventy millions, choking down. We love as one, we hate as one. We have one foe and one alone— ENGLAND!"

All evidence of an unbalanced mind. If hate exists on the part of those "seventy millions" of Germans it would be logical to represent it as directed at Sir Edward Grey or Lord Kitchener. And maybe there are quite a lot of English citizens who think they hate the Kaiser. The whole thing is futile—reminds one of the celebrated 'bus story. The driver's whip accidentally nips a choleric Briton standing on the curbstone. He immediately pursues the 'bus with upraised umbrella. Being too late to reach the driver with it he



Mr. Alfred Noyes.

lands on the conductor—and walks away entirely satisfied. Like their English comrades, German poets appear soon to have recognized the futility of war poems that stretch the truth beyond what the truth will bear. Otherwise why has no inspired singer of that country celebrated the famous renaming of Ostend? Wouldn't that help the German people to believe that Ostend really is "Calais"? It is now five months since the war began. How it is possible to expect

great literature to be produced in five months? Great deeds are accomplished more quickly than great literature, yet that for which Lord Nelson is remembered took more than three years. With the advantage of a perspective of a hundred, or two hundred, years we may expect the essentials of this war to be worthily illuminated in poetry. Of infinitely greater value at this time than the current efforts of living poets are the expressions of our masters in that art long since dead and gone.

Some of these have recently been quoted in the newspapers, and thus their power has been felt by the multitude at a time when their influence was needed. For example, I can recall nothing more potent and pertinent at this time than Wordsworth's "Ode to Duty." Shakespeare, Tennyson, Goethe, Schiller—the works of all our poet-masters contain whole poems and inspiring lines innumerable whose message to humanity, if taken to heart, would make war an impossibility, even enable us to tear up all our treaties.

Sad to relate, but equally true, one American rag-time song, guiltless of a rag of art in either its verses or its music, has done more to harden our "Tommys" in the trenches than the whole of the current output of war poems. High minded and well intentioned persons in England have done their utmost to substitute for this music hall ditty words and music of a high or artistic value, but all in vain. "Tommy" simply would have his "Tipperary."

You remember what Roge de Lisle's "Marseillaise" did for the French Revolution, and how it still, better than any other song, crystallizes patriotic sentiment in France? It seems to me that your Civil War production, "John Brown's Body," is an example of equal force. The popular "punch" which nobody can escape lies in those two happy lines:

"John Brown's body lies moldering in the ground,
But his soul goes marching on."

That was true, and nothing more remained to be said.

I suppose that "Tipperary" and "John Brown's Body" are equally val-

ueless from the art standpoint. There is where the poet and the song writer have so little in common—with the advantage, in the case of spontaneous production, all on the latter's side. You can't stop "Tipperary," and you can't get general attention for even the best of current war poems.

A learned Italian psychologist has been at great pains to analyze "Tipperary," and show just why it is the best kind of song for the soldiers of the allies. It's really very simple. It voices every "Tommy's" point of honor to "buck up" when there's trouble ahead—he confesses that it's "a long way to Tipperary," while indulging the unspoken conviction that it's "a jolly lot longer way for the Germans."

"Tommy Atkins" never deceives himself. Disturbing truths he accepts and enunciates even in his most ebullient moments. Like the instances when a trainload of them were leaving to embark for the front in France and Belgium. As the train slowly started with every window open and filled with heads one Tommy yells to his comrades revealed at other windows:

"Are we downhearted?"
"No! No!"—a thundering chorus of negatives.

"Well, if you ain't downhearted, you bloody soon will be!"

That's Tommy all over. What are you going to do with such chaps? Certainly it's no good writing war poems at them.

When Seymour Hicks, Elaine Terriss and other popular English actors and singers went over to Flanders and gave our soldiers a music hall programme they did not neglect a hundred or so of the badly wounded lying in a certain hospital. In spite of the wounds—some of them hopeless—never was there a more cheerful or enthusiastic audience. At the end of the programme came an unexpected revelation. In a very low voice Miss Terriss sang "Tipperary." Wondering at the sudden hush, she looked about her. Hardly a cot among the scores of them that was not shaken with the sob of a wounded and helpless "Tommy."

Personally I don't think much of current specimens of war poetry, not excepting my own.

Cut Along This Line, Then Fold Music for Your Piano Rest

2

Home Sweet Home! Just ask him why, He'll
one step "Fan," But they com - promise, When a
wink an eye, And say I've got to roam. Cause
girl he spies, On this com - bin - a - tion plan. For

Refrain.
One Step.
the girl - ies keep a fel - low bus - y Dan - cing is sub - lime.
Get - ting hep to ev - ry step Just scam - bles up my time.

3

But you've got to love them as a - round the room you whirl,
Dip - ping sway - ing mu - sic a play - ing For you
and your girl, I know my home is hap - py, But it is - n't half so
snap - py. Oh! the girl - ies keep a fel - low bus - y. The y.

1. 2.
D.C. for Dance.