Classic Poetry Series

George William Lewis Marshall-Hall
- poems -

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George William Lewis Marshall-Hall (28 March 1862 – 18 July 1915)

George William Louis Marshall-Hall was an English-born musician, composer, conductor, poet and controversialist who lived and worked in Australia from 1891 till his death in 1915. According to his birth certificate, his surname was 'Hall' and 'Marshall' was his fourth given name, which commemorated his physiologist grandfather, Marshall Hall (1790–1857) well-known for his pioneering studies of reflex nervous action and the resuscitation of apparently drowned persons. George's father, a barrister—who, however, never practised that profession —appears to have been the first to hyphenate the name and his sons followed suit.

Early life

Adventure, it seems, played an important role in George Marshall-Hall's youth. His father owned a 65 ton iron ocean-going yacht which, he said, was kept 'in great measure to give my family fresh air, the opportunity of seeing foreign ports, of leading a healthy life such as cannot be led on shore'. He was, he declared, a 'family yachtsman who likes to see his youngsters' skin tanned'. As a child, George probably participated in family trips on this vessel when it explored Norwegian fjords and grappled for broken telegraph cable in the Atlantic Ocean.
He began his schooling in Brighton. But then his family moved to Blackheath in London's southeast where in 1873 he enrolled in the Blackheath Proprietary School and at much the same time began taking private music lessons. His interest in music, according to his brother, had first been aroused by his paternal grandmother and his great-uncle. The latter, it seems, was himself an organist and composer. In 1878 the family moved again, this time to Montreux on the shore of Lake Geneva in Switzerland where George formed a choral society which met to practise in the family dining room.
By 1880, having become proficient in both French and German, he was back in England teaching languages and music—first at the Oxford Military College, Cowley and afterwards at Newton College, South Devon Then late in 1886, bent now on devoting himself to a career in music, he returned briefly to Switzerland to take up a position as organist in Lausanne before becoming musical director of Wellington College in Crowthorne, Berkshire.In 1888 he was appointed orchestral and choral conductor and composition and singing teacher at the London Organ School and Instrumental College of Music. At the same time, articles written by him on musical subjects began appearing in English newspapers and magazines.
He was later to claim that his father disapproved of his choice of career, declaring that 'he wouldn't want any damn fiddler in his family' and when thwarted in this regard, cut his son off without a shilling.So, George apparently received no paternal assistance when, unable to get enough work

in his chosen profession on occasions in the 1880s, he was compelled, he recalled, to sleep in the snow in Trafalgar Square and to button his jacket up to the neck when in polite society in order to conceal his lack of a shirt collar and waistcoat.

Career in Australia

Hall began his work early in 1891, and at once decided that he could do little of value unless a conservatorium of music were attached to the university. There was no financial provision for a conservatorium and it was not possible to start one until 1895, when Hall undertook the responsibility of it. It actually paid its way from the beginning.
Hall was an inspiring teacher and gained the loyalty of all his pupils. From 1896 Hall published four volumes of verse, To Irene (1896), Hymn to Sydney (1897), A Book of Canticles (1897), and Hymns Ancient and Modern (1898), the last volume in particular offending the sensibilities of many religious people. He was attacked by The Argus newspaper and much controversy followed. It was decided in 1900, on the casting vote of the chairman of the university council, that Hall, whose second term of appointment for a period of five years expired at the end of the current year, should not be reappointed. Hall then started a rival conservatorium known as the Albert Street Conservatorium, and conducted it with success. He had begun a series of orchestral concerts in 1893, and for a period of nearly 20 years carried them on, keeping a very high musical standard. He was an enthusiastic and inspiring conductor, painstaking and sensitive, especially successful in his renderings of Beethoven and Wagner. About 1912 Hall went to London, and in 1914 was offered his old position of Ormond professor at the University of Melbourne. He took up his duties again at the beginning of 1915, but died on 18 July 1915, following an operation for appendicitis. He was married twice and left a widow, a daughter by the first marriage, and a son by the second.

Legacy

Hall was also the author of two tragedies in verse, Aristodemus (c. 1900), and Bianca Capello (1906). These are now so rare as to be practically unprocurable. He composed many songs, three operas, the music for productions of Alcestis and The Trojan Women, and much chamber music. A symphony by him was played at the Queen's Hall, London, in 1907 conducted by Sir Henry Wood, and an opera, Stella, was performed in Melbourne. Though somewhat influenced by the work of Wagner, Brahms, and Puccini, Hall's compositions had pronounced individuality and sincerity. It was as a teacher, however, enthusiastic and free from pedantry, and as an inspiring orchestral conductor that Hall did his most important work, and the value of his influence on the musical life of Melbourne can hardly be over-stated. Hall was tall, dark, witty and humorous but intolerant of pretence.

Works:

Aristodemus (c. 1900)
Bianca Capello (1906)
To Irene (1896)
Hymn to Sydney (1897)
A Book of Canticles (1897)
Hymns Ancient and Modern (1898)

On Reading Shakepeare's Sonnets

THY verse is like a cool and shady well
 Lying a-dream within some moss-walled close
 Far from the common way, where violets doze
In green-deep grass beside the sweet hare-bell.

And each wayfarer as he stoopeth there
 Doth spy a face that is most like his own,
 So weary and—ah me!—so woe-begone
That almost he forgetteth his deep care.

There is a royal restraint in thy sad rhyme,
 Dis-calmèd calm, and passion passionless,
 And mellowed is all taint of bitterness
Into the harmony of that still time

When leaves are yellowing in the sallow sun
 And evening’s bloom is flush across the sky,
When haggard summer tottereth in his run
 And gracious moist-eyed autumn draweth nigh.

O king! majestical in thy decline
As in thy Spring,—might such an end be mine!

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To Giusue Carducci

O RICH and splendid soul that overflowest
 With light and fire caught from thy native skies!—
 Whose latent storm is lurid in thine eyes
When with august and bended brows thou throwest

Thy Jove-like bolt upon the world below.
 Woe, woe the wretch—that ever he was born!
 Whom once the fierce sirocco of thy scorn
Encircles, deadly, withering,—Ah woe!

But thrice-blest She, whom with one golden word
 Thou settest in the firmament of heaven,
 A happy, deathless star;—a wonder given
To awe-eyed mortals while thy voice is heard.

And she—ah me!—her name is—ITALY!
 Most glorious and most woful of all names!
 Whose sweet sound the whole world’s vast heart inflames
So chanted by her last great son—by thee

George William Lewis Marshall-Hall