

Classic Poetry Series

Joseph Howe

- 3 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Joseph Howe (13 December 1804 – 1 June 1873)

Joseph Howe, (December 13, 1804 – June 1, 1873) was a Nova Scotian journalist, politician, and public servant. He is one of Nova Scotia's greatest and best-loved politicians. His considerable skills as a journalist and writer have made him a Nova Scotia legend.

He was born the son of John Howe and Mary Edes at Halifax and inherited from his loyalist father an undying love for Great Britain and her Empire. At age 23, the self-taught but widely-read Howe purchased the *Novascotian*, soon making it into a popular and influential newspaper. He reported extensively on debates in the Nova Scotia House of Assembly and travelled to every part of the province writing about its geography and people. In 1835, Howe was charged with seditious libel, a serious criminal offence, after the *Novascotian* published a letter attacking Halifax politicians and police for pocketing public money. Howe addressed the jury for more than six hours, citing example after example of civic corruption. The judge called for Howe's conviction, but swayed by his passionate address, jurors acquitted him in what is considered a landmark case in the struggle for a free press in Canada.

The next year, Howe was elected to the assembly as a liberal reformer, beginning a long and eventful public career. He was instrumental in helping Nova Scotia become the first British colony to win responsible government in 1848. He served as premier of Nova Scotia from 1860 to 1863 and led the unsuccessful fight against Canadian Confederation from 1866 to 1868. Having failed to persuade the British to repeal Confederation, Howe joined the federal cabinet of John A. Macdonald in 1869 and played a major role in bringing Manitoba into the union. Howe became the third Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia in 1873, but died after only three weeks in office. The Howe family was of Puritan stock from Massachusetts. Having remained loyal to the crown during the American Revolution, the family of John Howe joined the flood of United Empire Loyalists out of the United States after the American revolutionaries succeeded in their claims of independence. On arrival at Halifax, John Howe was rewarded for his loyalty by appointment as Postmaster-General. Since he was in the printing business, John Howe was appointed also the King's Printer. Joseph Howe was born at Halifax, Nova Scotia, the son of John Howe & Mary Edes. His son, Joseph Howe, like many lads of that time, received only a limited formal education before beginning an apprenticeship at the age of 13. He served his apprenticeship at the printing shop that the senior Howe had established in 1781. They published a newspaper, the *Halifax Journal*. He married Catherine Ann Susan McNab on February 2, 1828.

Billboard displayed on the ChronicleHerald building in downtown Halifax. Howe once edited the Chronicle. That same year he went into the printing business himself with the purchase of the Novascotian, a Halifax newspaper. Howe acted as its editor until 1841, turning the paper into the most influential in the province. Not only did he personally report the legislative assembly debates in its columns, he also published provincial literature and his own travel writings, using the paper as a means for educating the people of Nova Scotia, and himself.

Once More I Put my Bonnet On

Once more I put my bonnet on,
And tie the ribbons blue,
My showy poplin dress I don,
That's just as good as new,
And smooth and stately as a swan
Go sailing to my pew.
Once more, Ah! me, how oft, how oft,
Shall I the scene repeat?
With graceful ease and manner soft
I sink into my seat,
And round the congregation waft
The sense of odors sweet.

A finer form, a fairer face
Ne'er bent before the stole,
With more restraint, no spotless lace
Did firmer orbs control,
I shine, the Beauty of the place,
And yet I look all soul.

When to the sinful people round
My pitying glances rove
The dewy tints of Heaven's profound
Seem in my eyes to move,
Too sorrowful their hearts to wound,
And hardly asking love.

And thus for four long years I've sat,
My gloves without a crease,
For two of them I wore a hat,
For one a blue pelisse,
When will the wicked know what's what,
The weary heart have peace?

My head gear twenty times I've changed,
Worn Paris flowers in Spring,
Wheat ears in Autumn, re-arranged,
Tried birds of every wing,
Bade that from Paradise estranged
Its lustre o'er me fling.

But yet, as "nether millstones" hard
The hearts of men appear,
Smooth shaved, "or bearded like the pard"
They're worse from year to year.
My "virtue is its own reward,"
I'm sitting single here.

The Rector's eyes, a brilliant pair,
Lit up with love divine,
Beaming with inspiration rare,
And phrenzy very fine,

Like nestling birds from upper air,
Would gently droop to mine.

What could I think, as day by day
His gaze more earnest grew,
Till half the girls began to say
He neither cared nor knew,
Though all the Church should go astray
If he could save my pew.

I read divinity by reams,
The Bible got by heart,
I studied all the Church's "Schemes,"
Prepared to play my part
Of Rector's wife, as well beseems
A lady of high Art.

But, let the truth at once be told,
Religion's cause was nought,
For Twenty Thousand Pounds in gold
The Rector's heart was bought,
And I was most completely sold,
The Blackbird was not caught.

The Curate's hair was crisp and brown,
His color very high;
His ample chest came sloping down,
Antinous-like his thigh,
Sin shrank before his gathered frown,
Peace whispered in his sigh.

So young! I hoped his steps to guide
From error's devious way;
By bad example sorely tried,
I feared the youth might stray;
To life's allurements opening wide
Become an easy prey.

I did my best, I watched and prayed,
His ardent soul to save,
But by the sinful flesh betrayed,
What could I do but rave?
Ten stone of blonde, in lace arrayed
Walked with him down the nave.

If Gospel truth must now be told
I've selfish grown of late,
The Banker next though somewhat old,
And limping in his gait,
And quite as yellow as his gold,
I thought to animate.

I'm sure my Note he would have "done"
With "two good names" upon it;
I do not think he ever run
His eye glass o'er my sonnet,
Or counted, in the morning sun
The feathers in my bonnet.

The widowed Judge I next essayed,
His orphans kindly viewing,
Read Blackstone nearly through 'tis said,
All gaudy dress eschewing;
But, am I doomed to die a maid?
Not yet he comes a wooing.

Once more I'll put my bonnet on
And tie the ribbons blue;
My showy poplin dress I'll don,
That's just as good as new,
And smooth and stately as a swan
Go sailing to my pew.

Merchants and Lawyers, half a score,
Bow on their hats to pray,
Tho' scattered round, I'm very sure
They always look my way.
I'll re-appear, encore! encore!
Who shall I catch to-day?

Joseph Howe

Sable Island

Dark Isle of Mourning--aptly art thou named,
For thou hast been the cause of many a tear;
For deeds of treacherous strife too justly famed,
The Atlantic's charnel--desolate and drear;
A thing none love--though wand'ring thousands fear--
If for a moment rests the Muse's wing
Where through the waves thy sandy wastes appear,
'Tis that she may one strain of horror sing,
Wild as the dashing waves that tempests o'er thee fling.

The winds have been thy minstrels--the rent shrouds
Of hapless barks, twanging at dead of night,
Thy fav'rite harp strings--the shriek of crowds
Clinging around them feebly in their fright,
The song in which thou long hast had delight,
Dark child of ocean, at thy feasts of blood;
When mangled forms, shown by Heaven's lurid light,
Rose to thy lip upon the swelling flood,
While Death, with horrid front, beside thee gloating stood.

As lurks the hungry tiger for his prey,
Low crouch'd to earth with well dissembled mien,
Peace in his eye--the savage wish to slay
Rankling around his heart--so thou art seen
Stretch'd harmlessly on ocean's breast of green,
When winds are hush'd, and sleeps the placid wave
Beneath the evening ray--whose glittering sheen
Gilds the soft swells thy arid folds that lave,
Unconscious that they cling around a yawning grave.

The fascination of the Siren's song,
The shadow of the fatal Upas tree;
The Serpent's eye that lures the bird along
To certain doom--less deadly are than thee
Even in thy hours of calm serenity,
When on thy sands the lazy seals repose,
And steeds, unbridled, sporting carelessly,
Crop the rank grass that on thy bosom grows,
While round the timid hare his glance of caution throws.

But when thy aspect changes--when the storm
Sweeps o'er the wide Atlantic's heaving breast;
When, hurrying on in many a giant form,
The broken waters by the winds are prest--
Roaring like fiends of hell which know no rest,
And guided by the lightning's fitful flash;
Who dares look on thee then--in terror drest,
As on thy length'ning beach the billows dash,
Shaking the heavens themselves with one long deaf'ning crash.

The winds are but thy blood-hounds, that do force
The prey into thy toils; th' insidious stream

That steadily pursues its noiseless course,
 Warmed by the glow of many a tropic beam,
To seas where northern blasts more rudely scream
 Is thy perpetual Almoner, and brings
All that to man doth rich and lovely seem,
 Earth's glorious gifts,--its fair and holy things,
And round thy dreary shores its spoils profusely flings.

The stateliest stems the Northern forest yields,
 The richest produce of each Southern shore,
The gathered harvests of a thousand fields,
 Earn'd by man's sweat--or paid for by his gore.
The splendid robes the cavern'd Monsters wore,
 The gold that sparkled in Potosi's mine,
The perfumed spice the Eastern islands bore,
 The gems whose rays like morning's sunbeams shine,
All--all--insatiate Isle--these treasures all are thine.

But what are these, compared with the rich spoils
 Of human hearts, with fond affections stored:
Of manly forms, o'ertaken by thy toils--
 Of glorious spirits, 'mid thy sands outpoured.
Thousands who've braved War's desolating sword,
 Who've walk'd through earth's worst perils undismayed,
Now swell the treasures of thy ample hoard;
 Deep in thy vaults their whitening bones are laid,
While many a burning tear is to their mem'ries paid.

And oft--as though you sought to mock man's eye--
 Thy shifting sands their treasured spoils disclose:
There may we some long-missing wreck descry,
 Some broken mast, that once so proudly rose
Above the peopled deck; some toy, that shows
 The fate of her upon whose breast it hung,
But who now sleeps in undisturbed repose,
 Where by the waves her beauteous form was flung,
May peace be with her manes--the lovely and the young.

Why does the Father, at the dawn of day,
 Fly from his feverish couch and horrid dreams,
And up the mountain side pursue his way,
 And turn to gaze upon the sea, which seems
Blent with the heavens--until the gorgeous beams
 Of the bright sun each cloud and wave reveal?
Whence comes the tear that o'er that pale cheek streams--
 As, tired with gazing, on the earth he kneels,
And pours in prayer to God the anguish that he feels?

Why does the matron heave that constant sigh?
 Why does she start at every distant sound?
Her cheerful fire is blazing 'neath her eye,
 Her fair and happy children sporting round,

Appealing to her heart at every bound,
While on her lap one rose-lipped babe reclines,
And looks into her face with joy profound.
But yet the mother secretly repines,
And through a tearful eye her spirit dimly shines.

Why does the maiden shun the giddy throng,
And find no pleasure in the festive hour?
Strange that the mazy dance, and choral song,
O'er one so young should hold no spell of power.
Why droops her head, as in her fairy bower
Her lute is only tuned to sorrow's strain?
Is there no magic in the perfumed flower,
To lure her thoughts from off the bounding main?
Oh! when shall joy return to that pure breast again?

Canst thou not read this riddle, gloomy isle?
Say--when shall that old man behold his boy?
When shall a son's glad voice--a son's bright smile
Wake in that mother's heart the throb of joy?
When shall glad thoughts that maiden's hours employ?
When shall her lover spring to her embrace?
Ask of the winds accustomed to destroy--
Ask of the waves which know their resting-place--
And they in thy deep caves their early graves may trace.

Farewell! dark Isle--the Muse must spread her wing,
To seek for brighter themes in scenes more fair,
Too happy if the strain she strove to sing,
Shall warn the sailor of thy deadly snare;
Oh! would the gods but hear her fervent prayer,
The fate of famed Atlantis should be thine--
No longer crouching in thy dangerous lair,
But sunk far down beneath the 'whelming brine,
Known but to History's page--or in the poet's line.

Joseph Howe

To the Town Clock

Thou grave old Time Piece, many a time and oft
I've been your debtor for the time of day;
And every time I cast my eyes aloft,
And swell the debt--I think 'tis time to pay.
Thou, like a sentinel upon a tower,
Hast thou still announced "the enemy's" retreat,
And now that I have got a leisure hour,
Thy praise, thou old Repeater, I'll repeat.
A very striking object, all must own,
For years you've been, and may for years remain,
And though fierce storms around your head have blown,
Your form erect, and clear and mellow tone,
Despite their violence, you still retain.

A "double face," some foolishly believe,
Of gross deception is a certain sign;
But thy four faces may their fears relieve,
For who can boast so frank a life as thine.
You ne'er disguised your thoughts for purpose mean,
You ne'er conceal'd your knowledge from the crowd,
Like knaves and asses that I've sometimes seen,
But what you knew with fearlessness avow'd.

Time, with his scythe, could never mow you down,
Though you could cut him up in fragments small--
Showing his halves and quarters to the town,
Old Quarter Master General for us all.
Though unambitious, still the highest place
All ranks and classes cheerfully resign,
And "looking up to thee," feel no disgrace
If to "look down on them" thou dost incline.
While some the Graces seek,
And others love the Muse's rosy bowers--
Thou art content from week to week,
To revel with the ever fleeting Hours.

How many curious scenes and odd displays
You've gazed upon, since first you took your stand;
How many sad, how many brilliant days,
You've had a hand in--Oh! that you could hand
Your knowledge down--
Your Log--your Album--all your observations,
Jokes and remarks, on what you've heard and seen;
If besides "note of time," your cogitations
On all the doings that in time have been
You had recorded,
No book would sell so well
About the town,
Nor any author be so well rewarded.

What various feelings, in the human heart,
Thy tones have stirred;--

How hast the Lover curs'd thee, when he heard
Thy voice proclaiming it was time to part.

With what a start

Of quick delight, about to be set free,
The schoolboy heard you say that it was three;
But then, next morning, how he'd sigh and whine
When you as frankly told him it was nine;
Oh! cruel Clock! thus carelessly to shout it,
If e'er you'd play'd
At Ball, or By the Way, on the Parade,
You never would have said one word about it.

To wretch, condemn'd for flagrant crimes to swing,
What horrid anguish would thy clear tones bring,
Telling his hour!

But, to the pilloried scoundrel, placed on high,
Round whom stale fish and rotten eggs did fly--
A fearful shower!

Whose dodging shoulders, and averted eye,
Half uttered prayer, or sharp and piercing cry,
Betray'd his fears;

Who thought "his hour" would surely last all day,
Sweet was thy welcome voice, when it did say
The storm about his ears
Should cease and die away.

How oft hast thou observ'd the hapless wight,
Who'd toil'd, and raked, and scraped, from morning light,
Till nearly three;

And yet had not enough his Note to pay,
Turn round to thee;

While throbbing brow, and nervous gait did say,
Hold--hold--good Clock, another quarter stay--

For if I cannot raise, or beg or borrow,
My credit will have died before tomorrow,
For this I do assure you's, my "last day."

The Sun stood still, at Joshua's command,
Oh! be as kind, or I can never stand;
Ah! do--if you of pity have one drop,
If you "go on," by Heaven I'll have "to stop."

How many dashing blades have gone to pot,
Who sought on Folly's files the first to be;

But never one, of all the precious lot,
Could live, old friend, so long "on tick" as thee.

The cunning fellows, too, thou put'st to shame,
Who scheme, and plot, and plan from morn till eve;

Thy "wheels within wheels" always go the same,
While they, some "screw loose" failing to perceive,
On ev'ry side their wreck'd machinery leave.

A good example

To all the idle chaps about the town,
Who trample
On precepts by economists set down,
You always gave;
Your "hands" were going night and day;
From year to year you toil'd away
Like any slave;
Your limbs from heavy weights no hour were free
And "Sunday dawned no holiday to thee."
You "the whole figure" went while others faltered,
And howsoe'er times changed, your time ne'er altered.

Joseph Howe