

Classic Poetry Series

Ebenezer Elliott
- poems -

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Ebenezer Elliott(17 March 1781 – 1 December 1849)

Ebenezer Elliott was an English poet, known as the Corn Law rhymer.

Early Life

Elliott was born at the New Foundry, Masbrough, in the Parish of Rotherham, Yorkshire. His father, (known as "Devil Elliott", for his fiery sermons) was an extreme Calvinist and a strong Radical, and was engaged in the iron trade. His mother suffered from poor health, and young Ebenezer, although one of a family of eleven children, of whom eight reached mature life, had a solitary and rather morbid childhood. At the age of six he contracted small-pox, which left him "fearfully disfigured and six weeks blind." His health was permanently affected, and he suffered from illness and depression in later life.

He was first educated at a dame school, then attended the Hollis School in Rotherham, where he was 'taught to write and little more.', but was generally regarded as a dunce. He hated school, and preferred to play truant, spending his time exploring the countryside around Rotherham, observing the plants and local wildlife. At about fourteen he began to read extensively on his own account, and in his leisure hours he studied botany, collected plants and flowers, and was delighted at the appearance of "a beautiful green snake about a yard long, which on the fine Sabbath mornings about ten o'clock seemed to expect me at the top of Primrose Lane." When he was sixteen he was sent to work at his father's foundry, working for the next seven years with no wages beyond a little pocket money.

Early Works

In a fragment of autobiography printed in *The Athenaeum* (12 January 1850) he says that he was entirely self-taught, and attributes his poetic development to long country walks undertaken in search of wild flowers, and to a collection of books, including the works of Young, Barrow, Shenstone and John Milton, bequeathed to his father. His son-in-law, John Watkins, gave a more detailed account in "The Life, Poetry and Letters of Ebenezer Elliott", published 1850. One Sunday morning, after a heavy night's drinking, Elliott missed chapel and visited his Aunt Robinson where he picked up a botany book, Sowerby's "English Botany." He was entranced by the colour plates of flowers and when she encouraged him to make his own flower drawings, he was thrilled to find he had a flair for it.

His younger brother, Giles, whom he had always admired, read him a poem from James Thomson's "Seasons" which described polyanthus and auricular flowers, and this was a turning point in Elliott's life. He realised that he could successfully combine his love of nature, and his talent for drawing, with writing poems and decorating them with flower illustrations.

In 1798, aged seventeen, he wrote his first poem Vernal Walk in imitation of James Thompson. He was also influenced by Byron and the Romantic poets and Robert Southey who later became Poet Laureate. In 1808 Elliott wrote to Southey asking for advice on getting published. Elliott was delighted when Southey replied. Their correspondence over the years encouraged him and reinforced his determination to make a name for himself as a poet. Although they only met once, they exchanged letters until 1824, and Elliott declared that it was Southey who had taught him the art of poetry.

Other early poems were Second Nuptials and Night, or the Legend of Wharncliffe, which last was described by the Monthly Review as the 'Ne plus ultra of German horror and bombast.' His Tales of the Night, including The Exile and Bothwell, were considered to be of more merit, and brought him high commendations. His earlier volumes of poems, dealing with romantic themes, received much unfriendly comment, however the faults of Night, the earliest of these, are pointed out in a long and friendly letter (30 January 1819) from Southey to the author.

The Corn Law Rhymes

Elliott married Frances (Fanny) Gartside in 1806, and they had thirteen children. He invested his wife's fortune in his father's share of the iron foundry, but the affairs of the family firm were then in a desperate condition, and money difficulties hastened his father's death. Elliott lost everything, and in 1816 he was declared bankrupt. In 1819 he obtained funds from his wife's sisters and began another business as an iron dealer in Sheffield. The business prospered, and by 1829 he had become a successful iron merchant and steel manufacturer.

He remained bitter about his earlier failure. He attributed his father's pecuniary losses and his own to the operation of the Corn Laws and the demand to repeal them became the greatest issue in his life. When he was made bankrupt, he had been homeless and out of work; he had faced starvation and contemplated suicide. He knew what it was like to be impoverished and desperate and, as a result, he always identified with the poor. He became well known in Sheffield for his strident views demanding changes which would improve conditions both for the manufacturer and the worker. He formed the first society in England to call

for reform of the Corn Laws: the Sheffield Mechanics' Anti-Bread Tax Society founded in 1830. Four years later, he was the prime mover in establishing the Sheffield Anti-Corn Law Society and he also set up the Sheffield Mechanics' Institute. He was very active in the Sheffield Political Union, and he campaigned vigorously for the 1832 Reform Act. He took an active part in the Chartist agitation, but withdrew his support when the agitation for the repeal of the corn laws was removed from the Chartist programme. Until the Chartist Movement advocated the use of violence, Elliott was one of the leaders of the Sheffield organisation. He was the Sheffield delegate to the Great Public Meeting in Westminster in 1838 and he chaired the meeting in Sheffield when the Charter was introduced to local people.

The strength of his political convictions was reflected in the style and tenor of his verse, earning him the nickname " the Corn Law Rhymer", and making him internationally famous.

The Corn Law Rhymes, first published in 1831, had been preceded by the publication of the single long poem *The Ranter* in 1830. They were inspired by a fierce hatred of injustice, and are vigorous, simple and full of vivid description. The poems campaigned against the landowners in the government who stifled competition and kept the price of bread high. They were aggressive and sarcastic, attacking the status quo and demanding the repeal of the Corn Laws. They also drew attention to the dreadful conditions endured by working people, and ruthlessly contrasted their lot with the sleek and complacent gentry. In 1833-1835 Elliott also published *The Splendid Village; Corn-Law Rhymes, and other Poems* (3 vols.), which included *The Village Patriarch* (1829), *The Ranter*, an unsuccessful drama, *Keronah*, and other pieces.

His poems were published in the USA, and in Europe. The French magazine, *Le Revue Des Deux Mondes*, sent a journalist to Sheffield to interview him. The Corn Law Rhymes were initially thought to be written by an uneducated Sheffield mechanic who had rejected conventional Romantic ideals for a new style of working class poetry aimed at changing the system. Elliott was described as "a red son of the furnace " and called " the Yorkshire Burns" or " the Burns of the manufacturing city ". The journalist was surprised when he found Elliott to be a mild man with a nervous temperament.

Asa Briggs called Elliott "the poet of economic revolution" while Elliott himself observed: "I claim to be a pioneer of the greatest, the most beneficial, the only crimeless Revolution, which man has yet seen. I also claim to be the poet of that Revolution - the Bard of Free-trade; and through the prosperity, wisdom and loving-kindness which Free-trade will ultimately bring, the Bard of Universal

Peace."

He also contributed verses from time to time to Tails Magazine and to the Sheffield and Rotherham Independent. In 1837 his business failed and he again lost a great deal of money. This misfortune was also ascribed to the corn laws. He retired in 1841 with a small fortune and settled at Great Houghton, near Barnsley, where he lived quietly until his death in 1849 aged 68. He was buried in Darfield churchyard.

Contemporary Criticism

In 1850, appeared two volumes of More Prose and Verse by the Corn-Law Rhymer. Elliott lives by his determined opposition to the bread-tax, as he called it, and his poems on the subject are saved from the common fate of political poetry by their transparent sincerity and passionate earnestness.

An article by Thomas Carlyle in the Edinburgh Review (July 1832) is the best criticism on Elliott. Carlyle was attracted by Elliott's homely sincerity and genuine power, though he had small opinion of his political philosophy, and lamented his lack of humour and of the sense of proportion. He thought his poetry too imitative, detecting not only the truthful severity of Crabbe, but a slight bravura dash of the fair tuneful Hemans. His descriptions of his native county reveal close observation and a vivid perception of natural beauty.

His obituary appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine in February 1850. Two biographies were published in 1850, one by his son-in-law, John Watkins, and another by January Searle (G. S. Phillips). A new edition of his works by his son, Edwin Elliot, appeared in 1876.

The Peoples Anthem

This was one of Elliott's last poems. It was written for music in 1847, and was usually sung to the tune "Commonwealth". The People's Anthem first appeared in Tait's Edinburgh Review in 1848. The refrain "God save the people!" parodies the British national anthem, God Save the Queen and demands support for ordinary people instead. Despite its huge popularity, some churches refused to use hymn books which contained it, as it can also be seen as a criticism of God. In his notes on the poem, Elliott demanded that the vote be given to all responsible householders. "The People's Anthem" was a great favourite for many years, and in the 1920s it was suggested that Elliott's poem qualified him to be designated Poet Laureate of the League of Nations.

The People's Anthem

When wilt thou save the people?
Oh, God of mercy! when?
Not kings and lords, but nations!
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
Flowers of thy heart, oh, God, are they!
Let them not pass, like weeds, away!
Their heritage a sunless day!
God! save the people!

Epitaph

Towards the end of his life, Elliott suffered much pain and depression. His thoughts often turned to his own death and he wrote his own epitaph:

The Poet's Epitaph

Stop, Mortal! Here thy brother lies,
The Poet of the Poor
His books were rivers, woods and skies,
The meadow and the moor,
His teachers were the torn hearts' wail,
The tyrant, and the slave,
The street, the factory, the jail,
The palace – and the grave!
The meanest thing, earth's feeblest worm,
He fear'd to scorn or hate;
And honour'd in a peasant's form
The equal of the great.
But if he loved the rich who make
The poor man's little more,
Ill could he praise the rich who take
From plunder'd labour's store
A hand to do, a head to plan,
A heart to feel and dare –
Tell man's worst foes, here lies the man
Who drew them as they are.

After his death, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem in his memory, titled Elliott.

A bronze statue of Elliott by Neville Northey Burnard, paid for by the people of

Sheffield and Rotherham, was erected in 1854 in Sheffield market-place at a cost of £600. The statue was moved to Weston Park, Sheffield, in 1874, where it remains.

A Poet's Epitaph

STOP mortal ! Here thy brother lies,
The Poet of the Poor ;
His books were rivers, woods and skies,
The meadow and the moor;
His teachers were the torn heart's wail,
The tyrant and the slave,
The street, the factory, the jail,
The palace--and the grave!
The meanest thing, earth's feeblest worm
He feared to scorn or hate;
And honour'd in a peasant's form
The equal of the great.
But if he lov'd the rich who make
The poor man's little more,
Ill could he praise the rich who take
From plundered labour's store.
A hand to do, a head to plan,
A heart to feet and dare--
Tell man's worst foes, here lies the man
Who drew them as they are.

Ebenezer Elliott

In These Days . . .

In these days, every mother's son or daughter
Writes verse, which no one reads except the writer,
Although, uninked, the paper would be whiter,
And worth, per ream, a hare, when you have caught her.
Hundreds of unstaunched Shelleys daily water
Unanswering dust; a thousand Wordsworths scribble;
And twice a thousand Corn Law Rhymers dribble
Rhymed prose, unread. Hymners of fraud and slaughter,
By cant called other names, alone find buyers -
Who buy, but read not. 'What a loss in paper,'
Groans each immortal of the host of sighers!
'What profanation of the midnight taper
In expirations vile! But I write well,
And wisely print. Why don't my poems sell?'

Ebenezer Elliott

Plaint

Dark, deep, and cold the current flows
Unto the sea where no wind blows,
Seeking the land which no one knows.

O'er its sad gloom still comes and goes
The mingled wail of friends and foes,
Borne to the land which no one knows.

Why shrieks for help yon wretch, who goes
With millions, from a world of woes,
Unto the land which no one knows?

Though myriads go with him who goes,
Alone he goes where no wind blows,
Unto the land which no one knows.

For all must go where no wind blows,
And none can go for him who goes;
None, none return whence no one knows.

Yet why should he who shrieking goes
With millions, from a world of woes,
Reunion seek with it or those?

Alone with God, where no wind blows,
And Death, his shadow - doom'd, he goes.
That God is there the shadow shows.

O shoreless Deep, where no wind blows!
And thou, O Land which no one knows!
That God is All, His shadow shows.

Ebenezer Elliott

Rural Rambles - The Village

Sweet village! where my early days were pass'd,
Though parted long, we meet, we meet at last!
Like friends, imbrown'd by many a sun and wind,
Much changed in mien, but more in heart and mind,
Fair, after many years, thy fields appear,
With joy beheld, but not without a tear.
I met thy little river miles before
I saw again my natal cottage door:
Unchanged as truth, the river welcomed home
The wanderer of the sea's heart-breaking foam;
But the changed cottage, like a time-tried friend,
Smote on my heart-strings, at my journey's end.
For now no lilies bloom the door beside!
The very house-leek on the roof hath died;
The window'd gable's ivy bower is gone,
The rose departed from the porch of stone;
The pink, the violet, have fled away,
The polyanthus and auricula!
And round my home, once bright with flowers, I found
Not one square yard, one foot of garden ground.
Path of the quiet fields! that oft of yore
Call'd me at morn on Shenstone's page to pore;
Oh! poor man's pathway! where, 'at evening's close,'
He stopp'd to pluck the woodbine and the rose,
Shaking the dew-drop from the wild-brier bowers,
That stoop'd beneath their load of summer flowers,
Then eyed the west, still bright with fading flame,
As whistling homeward by the wood he came;
Sweet, dewy, sunny, flowery footpath, thou
Art gone for ever, like the poor man's cow!
No more the wandering townsman's Sabbath smile,
No more the hedger, waiting on the stile
For tardy Jane; no more the muttering bard,
Startling the heifer near the lone farm-yard;
No more the pious youth, with book in hand,
Spelling the words he fain would understand,-
Shall bless thy mazes, when the village bell
Sounds o'er the river, soften'd up the dell.
Here youngling fishers, in the grassy lane,

Purloin'd their tackle from the brood-mare's mane;
And truant urchins, by the river's brink,
Caught the fledged throstle as it stoop'd to drink;
Or with the ramping colt, all joyous play'd,
Or scared the owlet in the blue-ball shade.

Ebenezer Elliott

Steam In The Desert

'God made all nations of one blood,'
And bade the nation-wedding flood
Bear good for good to men:
Lo, interchange is happiness! -
The mindless are the riverless!
The shipless have no pen!

What deed sublime by them is wrought?
What type have they of speech or thought?
What soul ennobled page?
No record tells their tale of pain!
Th' unwritten History of Cain
Is theirs from age to age!

Steam! - if the nations grow not old
That see broad Ocean's 'back of gold,'
Or hear him in the wind -
Why dost thou not thy banner shake
O'er sealess, streamless lands, and make
One nation of mankind?

If rivers are but seeking rest,
E'en when they climb from ocean's breast,
To plant on earth the rose -
If good for good is doubly blest -
Oh! bid the sever'd east and west
In action find repose!

Yes, let the wilderness rejoice,
The voiceless campaign hear the voice
Of millions long estranged:
That waste, and want, and war may cease!
And all men know that Love and Peace
Are - good for good exchanged!

Ebenezer Elliott

The Builders

Spring, summer, autumn, winter,
Come duly, as of old;
Winds blow, suns set, and morning saith,
'Ye hills, put on your gold.'

The song of Homer liveth,
Dead Solon is not dead;
Thy splendid name, Pythagoras,
O'er realms of suns is spread.

But Babylon and Memphis
Are letters traced in dust;
Read them, earth's tyrants I ponder well
The might in which ye trust!

They rose, while all the depths of guilt
Their vain creators sounded;
They fell, because on fraud and force
Their corner-stones were founded.

Truth, mercy, knowledge, justice,
Are powers that ever stand;
They build their temples in the soul,
And work with God's right hand.

Ebenezer Elliott

The People's Anthem

When wilt Thou save the people?
O God of mercy! when?
Not kings and lords, but nations!
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
Flowers of Thy heart, O God, are they!
Let them not pass, like weeds, away!
Their heritage a sunless day!
God save the people!

Shall crime bring crime for ever,
Strength aiding still the strong?
Is it Thy will, O Father!
That man shall toil for wrong?
'No!' say Thy mountains; 'No!' Thy skies;
'Man's clouded sun shall brightly rise,
And songs be heard instead of sighs.'
God save the people!

When wilt thou save the people?
O God of mercy! when?
The people, Lord! the people!
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
God save the people! Thine they are;
Thy children, as Thy angels fair;
Save them from bondage and despair!
God save the people!

Ebenezer Elliott

The Tree Of Rivelin

The lightning, like an Arab, cross'd
The moon's dark path on high,
And wild on Rivelin writhed and toss'd
The stars and troubled sky,
Where lone the tree of ages grew,
With branches wide and tall;
Ah! who, when such a tempest blew,
Could hear his stormy fall?
But now the skies, the stars are still,
The blue wave sleeps again,
And heath and moss, by rock and rill,
Are whispering, in disdain,
That Rivelin's side is desolate,
Her giant in the dust!
Beware, O Power! for God is great,
O Guilt! for God is just!
And boast not, Pride! while millions pine,
That wealth secures thy home;
The storm that shakes all hearths but thine
Is not the storm to come.
The tremor of the stars is pale,
The dead clod quakes with fear,
The worm slinks down, o'er hill and vale,
When God in wrath draws near.
But if the Upas will not bend
Beneath the frown of Heaven,
A whisper cometh, which shall rend
What thunder hath not riven.

Ebenezer Elliott

To The Bramble Flower

Thy fruit full well the schoolboy knows,
Wild bramble of the brake!
So put thou forth thy small white rose;
I love it for his sake.
Thou woodbines flaunt and roses glow
O'er all the fragrant bowers,
Thou need'st not be ashamed to show
Thy satin-threaded flowers;
For dull the eye, the heart is dull,
That cannot feel how fair,
Amid all beauty beautiful,
Thy tender blossoms are!
How delicate thy gauzy frill!
How rich thy branchy stem!
How soft thy voice when woods are still,
And thou sing'st hymns to them;
While silent showers are falling slow,
And 'mid the gen'ral hush!
A sweet air lifts the little bough,
Lone whispering through the bush!
The primrose to the grave is gone;
The hawthorn flower is dead;
The violet by the moss'd gray stone
Hath laid her weary head;
But thou, wild bramble! back dost bring
In all their beauteous power,
The fresh green days of life's fair spring,
And boyhood's blossomy hour.
Scorn'd bramble of the brake! once more
Thou bidd'st me be a boy,
To gad with thee the woodlands o'er,
In freedom and in joy.

Ebenezer Elliott