

Classic Poetry Series

**Frances Browne**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2012

**Publisher:**

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# Frances Browne(16 January 1816 - 21 August 1879)

Frances Browne was an Irish poet and novelist, best remembered for her collection of short stories for children: *Granny's Wonderful Chair*.

She was born at Stranorlar, in County Donegal, Ireland, the seventh child of twelve. She was blind from infancy as a consequence of an attack of smallpox when she was only 18 months old. In her writings, she recounts how she learned by heart the lessons which her brothers and sisters said aloud every evening, and how she bribed them to read to her by doing their chores. She then worked hard at memorising all that she had heard. She wrote her first poem, a version of "The Lord's Prayer", when she was seven years of age.

## <b>First publications</b>

In 1841, her first poems were published in the *Irish Penny Journal* and in the *London Athenaeum*. One of those included in the *Irish Penny Journal* was the beautiful lyric, "Songs of Our Land" which can be found in many anthologies of Irish patriotic verse. She published a complete volume of poems in 1844, and a second volume in 1847. The provincial newspapers, especially the Belfast-based *Northern Whig* reprinted many of her poems and she became widely known as 'The Blind Poetess of Ulster'. In 1845 she made her first contribution to the popular magazine *Chambers's Journal* and she wrote for this journal for the next 25 years. The first short story that she had published in the *Journal* was entitled, "The Lost New Year's Gift". It appeared in March 1845 and tells the tragic tale of a poor dressmaker in London. It displays Frances Browne's fine abilities as a storyteller. She also contributed many short stories to magazines that had a largely female readership. For example in the 1850's she made a number of contributions to the "Ladies' Companion", a magazine read by many well-to-do women of the Victorian era. Stories contributed to this magazine included the very amusing "Mrs Sloper's Swan" and an eerie tale set in nagh called "The Botheration of Ballymore."

## <b>Emigration to Edinburgh</b>

In 1847, she left Donegal for Edinburgh with one of her sisters as her reader and amanuensis. She quickly established herself in literary circles, and wrote essays, reviews, stories, and poems, in spite of health problems. In 1852, she moved to London, where she wrote her first novel, *My Share of the World* (1861). Her most famous work, *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, was published in 1856 and it is still in print to this day. It is a richly imaginative book of fairy stories and has been

translated into many languages. It was also in 1856 that her third volume of poetry appeared - Pictures and Songs of Home. It is a slim volume of poems directed at very young children and contains beautiful illustrations. As the title suggests the poems focus on her childhood experiences in County Donegal and they are very evocative of the Donegal countryside.

### **<b>London and later life</b>**

After her move to London she wrote a lot for the Religious Tract Society making many contributions to their periodicals The Leisure Hour and The Sunday at Home. One of these was "1776: a tale of the American War of Independence" which was printed in The Leisure Hour on the centenary of that event in 1876. As well as describing some of the revolutionary events it is also a touching love story and is beautifully illustrated. Her last piece of writing was a poem called "The Children's Day" which appeared in "The Sunday at Home" in 1879.

She died unmarried at 19 St John's Grove in Richmond-upon-Thames on the 21st of August 1879 and was buried in the town's public cemetery on the 25th of August.

### **<b>Further reading</b>**

The most detailed biography available is The Life and Works of Frances Browne by Patrick Bonar published in 2007. There is also an analysis of some of her short stories in an article in the Donegal Annual for 2008 - "Frances Browne and the Legends of Ulster" by Raymond Blair. Raymond Blair has also edited an anthology of her poems, short stories and essays entitled "The Best of Frances Browne." There is an excellent treatment of her literary career by Paul Marchbanks in An A-to-Z of Irish Women Writers edited by A G Gonzalez (2006). Finally a brief entry about the poetess can be found in the magisterial Dictionary of Irish Biography recently published under the auspices of the Royal Irish Academy. Therefore, it would appear that the fame of the undeservedly forgotten blind poetess is being gradually restored.

# Autumn

Oh, welcome to the corn-clad slope,  
And to the laden tree,  
Thou promised autumn - for the hope  
Of nations turn'd to thee,  
Through all the hours of splendour past,  
With summer's bright career -  
And we see thee on thy throne at last,  
Crown'd monarch of the year!

Thou comest with gorgeous flowers  
That make the roses dim,  
With morning mists and sunny hours  
And wild birds' harvest hymn;  
Thou comest with the might of floods,  
The glow of moonlit skies,  
And the glory flung on fading woods  
Of thousand mingled dyes!

But never seem'd thy steps so bright  
On Europe's ancient shore,  
Since faded from the poet's sight  
That golden age of yore;  
For early harvest-home hath pour'd  
Its gladness on the earth,  
And the joy that lights the princely board  
Hath reach'd the peasant's hearth.

O Thou, whose silent bounty flows  
To bless the sower's art,  
With gifts that ever claim from us  
The harvests of the heart -  
If thus Thy goodness crown the year,  
What shall the glory be,  
When all Thy harvest, whitening here,  
Is gather'd home to Thee!

Frances Browne

# Littell's Living Age

We did not fear them once — the dull, gray mornings  
No cheerless burden on our spirits laid;  
The long night-watches did not bring us warnings  
That we were tenants of a house decayed;  
The early snows like dreams to us descended  
The frost did fairy-work on pave and bough;  
Beauty, and power, and wonder have not ended —  
How is it that we fear the winters now?

Their house-fires fall as bright on earth and chambers  
Their northern starlight shines as coldly clear;  
The woods still keep their holly for December;  
The world a welcome yet for the new year  
And far away in old remembered places  
The snow-dropp rises and the robin sings;  
The sun and moon look out with loving faces —  
Why have our days forgot such goodly things?

Is it now that north winds finds us shaken  
By tempests fiercer than its bitter blast,  
Which fair beliefs and friendships, too, have taken  
Away like summer foliage as they passed,  
And made life leafless in its pleasant valleys,  
Waning the light of promise from our day,  
Fell mists meet even in the inward palace —  
A dimness not like theirs to pass away?

It was not thus when dreams of love and laurels  
Gave sunshine to the winters of our youth,  
Before its hopes had fallen in fortune's quarrels,  
Or time had bowed them with his heavy truth —  
Ere yet the twilights found us strange and lonely,  
With shadows coming when the fire burns low,  
To tell of distant graves and losses only —  
The past that cannot change and will not go.

Alas! dear friends, the winter is within us,  
Hard is the ice that grows about the heart;  
For petty cares and vain regrets have won us

From life's true heritage and better part.  
Seasons, and skies rejoice, yea, worship rather;  
But nations toil and tremble even as we  
Hoping for harvest they will never gather,  
Fearing the winters which they may not see.

Frances Browne

# Songs Of Our Land

Songs of our land, ye are with us forever,  
The power and the splendor of thrones pass away;  
But yours is the might of some far flowing river.  
Through Summer's bright roses or Autumn's decay.

Ye treasure each voice of the swift passing ages,  
And truth which time writeth on leaves or on sand;  
Ye bring us the thoughts of poets and sages,  
And keep them among us, old songs of our land.

The bards may go down to the place of their slumbers,  
The lyre of the charmer be hushed in the grave,  
But far in the future the power of their numbers  
Shall kindle the hearts of our faithful and brave,

It will waken an echo in souls deep and lonely,  
Like voices of reeds by the summer breeze fanned;  
It will call up a spirit for freedom, when only  
Her breathings are heard in the songs of our land.

For they keep a record of those, the true-hearted,  
Who fell with the cause they had vowed to maintain;  
They show us bright shadows of glory departed,  
Of love that grew cold and hope that was vain.

The page may be lost and the pen long forsaken,  
And weeds may grow wild o'er the brave heart and hand;  
But ye are still left when all else hath been taken,  
Like streams in the desert, sweet songs of our land.

Songs of our land, ye have followed the stranger,  
With power over ocean and desert afar,  
Ye have gone with our wanderers through distance and danger,  
And gladdened their path like a homeguiding star.

With the breath of our mountains in summers long vanished,  
And visions that passed like a wave from the sand,  
With hope for their country and joy from her banished.  
Ye come to us ever, sweet songs of our land.

The spring time may come with the song of our glory,  
To bid the green heart of the forest rejoice,  
But the pine of the mountain though blasted and hoary,  
And the rock in the desert, can send forth a voice,

It was thus in their triumph for deep desolations,  
While ocean waves roll or the mountains shall stand,  
Still hearts that are bravest and best of the nations,  
Shall glory and live in the songs of our land.

Frances Browne