

Classic Poetry Series

John Todhunter
- poems -

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John Todhunter(30 December 1839 – 25 October 1916)

John Todhunter was an Irish poet and playwright who wrote seven volumes of poetry, and several plays.

Life

Todhunter was born in Dublin, the eldest son of Thomas Harvey Todhunter, a Quaker merchant of English origin. He and was educated at Quaker schools in York and Mountmellick. He attended Trinity College Medical School, where he studied medicine. While at Trinity, Todhunter won the Vice-Chancellor's prize for English Verse 1864, 1865 and 1866, and the Gold Medal of the Philosophical Society 1866 for an essay. He also clerked for William Stokes while studying. Todhunter received his Bachelor of Medicine in 1867, and his Doctorate of Medicine degree in 1871.

In 1870 (one year prior to his DM) he became a Professor of English Literature at Alexandra College, Dublin. Four years later, Todhunter resigned from that position, and travelled to several places in Europe, including Egypt. He married Dora L. Digby in 1879. In 1881, he finally settled in London, where his home in Bedford Park, Chiswick was located in a small community of writers and artists, who included W.B. Yeats. He was involved in the founding of the Irish Literary Society there.

His tragedy, The Black Cat only received one performance, on 8 December 1893 at the Opera Comique, by the Independent Theatre Society—a private club formed to forestall censorship by the Lord Chamberlain's Office.

Obituary

The source of this obituary is unknown; It is dated 27/10/16, and attributed to "Times", which likely refers to a local Australian newspaper.

The death of Dr. John Todhunter took place on Wednesday at his residence in Bedford Park.

He was born in Dublin in 1839, his father being a merchant of English origin and Quaker ancestry. He was educated at York School and at Trinity College, Dublin,

where he won the Vice-Chancellor's prize for English verse three times. He took his M.D. in Dublin and practised medicine for a couple of years, but gave it up for travel, study, and literary work. He was Professor of English Literature at Alexandra-College, Dublin, from 1870 to 1874. He then made his permanent home in London, where his house became a resort for artists and men of letters. During recent years informal "symposia" were held there about once a fortnight, when friends gathered at his fireside to discuss poetry and philosophy.

Todhunter's first volume was a collection of narrative and lyrical poems entitled "Laurella" (1876). Grace, tenderness, and melody marked these poems; in later years he did much stronger work under the influence of ancient Celtic literature, to the study of which he was led by the memorable rendering of the Cuchullin legend published in 1878 by Standish O'Grady. The "Banshee" (1888) and "Three Bardic Talcs" (1896) contain the best of Todhunter's work in poetry. Three plays of his have been acted with success; one of them, *The Black Cat*, produced by the Independent Theatre in 1893, was a factor in the revival of the literary drama. His translation of Heine's "Buch der Lieder" is perhaps the best complete English version of a work than which none more irresistibly attracts or more cruelly eludes the art of the translator. He was also author of a few brief prose works, including a "Life of Sarsfield" and a "Study of Shelley."

At one time he was a familiar figure at the Savile Club, but for some years his delicate health and his constitutional hatred of noise and bustle kept him far from town life. He was a man of striking appearance, and the sweetness, unselfishness, and loyalty of his character gave to intimacy with him a charm and fragrance which his friends will not easily forget.

A June Day

The very spirit of summer breathes to-day,
Here where I sun me in a dreamy mood,
And laps the sultry leas, and seems to brood
Tenderly o'er those hazed hills far away.
The air is fragrant with the new-mown hay,
And drowsed with hum of myriad flies pursued
By twittering martins. All yon hillside wood
Is drowned in sunshine till its green looks grey.
No scrap of cloud is in the still blue sky,
Vaporous with heat, from which the foreground trees
Stand out--each leaf cut sharp. The whetted scythe
Makes rustic music for me as I lie,
Watching the gambols of the children blythe,
Drinking the season's sweetness to the lees.

John Todhunter

Aghadoe

There's a glade in Aghadoe, Aghadoe, Aghadoe,
There 's a green and silent glade in Aghadoe,
Where we met, my love and I, Love's fair planet in the sky,
O'er that sweet and silent glade in Aghadoe.

There 's a glen in Aghadoe, Aghadoe, Aghadoe,
There 's a deep and secret glen in Aghadoe,
Where I hid from the eyes of the red-coats and their spies,
That year the trouble came to Aghadoe.

O, my curse on one black heart in Aghadoe, Aghadoe,
On Shaun Dhu, my mother's son in Aghadoe!
When your throat fries in hell's drouth, salt the flame be in your
mouth,
For the treachery you did in Aghadoe!

For they track'd me to that glen in Aghadoe, Aghadoe,
When the price was on his head in Aghadoe:
O'er the mountain, through the wood, as I stole to him with food,
Where in hiding lone he lay in Aghadoe.

But they never took him living in Aghadoe, Aghadoe;
With the bullets in his heart in Aghadoe,
There he lay, the head, my breast keeps the warmth of where 'twould
rest,
Gone, to win the traitor's gold, from Aghadoe!

I walk'd to Mallow town from Aghadoe, Aghadoe,
Brought his head from the gaol's gate to Aghadoe;
Then I cover'd him with fern, and I piled on him the cairn,
Like an Irish King he sleeps in Aghadoe.

O, to creep into that cairn in Aghadoe, Aghadoe!
There to rest upon his breast in Aghadoe!
Sure your dog for you could die with no truer heart than I,
Your own love, cold on your cairn in Aghadoe.

John Todhunter

Golgotha

1.

On his cross still hangs the Saviour,
Bears our sins in dreadful sum,
Eighteen centuries and three quarters,
Yet his kingdom is not come.

2.

"It is finished!" Was it finished
When thy path of pain was trod?
Thou didst bear the sins of mortals,
Who shall bear the sins of God?

John Todhunter

Maureen

O, you plant the pain in my heart with your wistful eyes,
Girl of my choice, Maureen!
Will you drive me mad for the kisses your shy, sweet mouth denies,
Maureen?

Like a walking ghost I am, and no words to woo,
White rose of the West, Maureen:
For it 's pale you are, and the fear that 's on you is over me too,
Maureen!

Sure it 's one complaint that 's on us, asthore, this day,
Bride of my dreams, Maureen:
The smart of the bee that stung us his honey must cure, they say,
Maureen!

I'll coax the light to your eyes, and the rose to your face,
Mavourneen, my own Maureen!
When I feel the warmth of your breast, and your nest is my arm's embrace,
Maureen!

O where was the King o' the World that day—only me?
My one true love, Maureen!
And you the Queen with me there, and your throne in my heart, machree,
Maureen!

John Todhunter

The Banshee

Green, in the wizard arms
Of the foam-bearded Atlantic,
An isle of old enchantment,
A melancholy isle,
Enchanted and dreaming lies;
And there, by Shannon's flowing,
In the moonlight, spectre-thin,
The spectre Erin sits.

An aged desolation,
She sits by old Shannon's flowing,
A mother of many children,
Of children exiled and dead,
In her home, with bent head, homeless,
Clasping her knees she sits,
Keening, keening!

And at her keen the fairy-grass
Trembles on dun and barrow;
Around the foot of her ancient crosses
The grave-grass shakes and the nettle swings;
In haunted glens the meadow-sweet
Flings to the night wind
Her mystic mournful perfume;
The sad spearmint by holy wells
Breathes melancholy balm.
Sometimes she lifts her head,
With blue eyes tearless,
And gazes athwart the reek of night
Upon things long past,
Upon things to come.

And sometimes, when the moon
Brings tempest upon the deep,
The roused Atlantic thunders from his caverns in the west,
The wolfhound at her feet
Springs up with a mighty bay,
And chords of mystery sound from the wild harp at her side,
Strung from the hearts of poets;

And she flies on the wings of tempest
With grey hair streaming:
A meteor of evil omen,
The spectre of hope forlorn,
Keening, keening!

She keens, and the strings of her wild harp shiver
On the gusts of night:
O'er the four waters she keens--over Moyle she keens,
O'er the Sea of Milith, and the Strait of Strongbow,
And the Ocean of Columbus.

And the Fianna hear, and the ghosts of her cloudy hovering heroes;
And the swan, Fianoula, wails o'er the waters of Inisfail,
Chanting her song of destiny,
The rune of weaving Fates.
And the nations hear in the void and quaking time of night,
Sad unto dawning, dirges,
Solemn dirges,
And snatches of bardic song;
Their souls quake in the void and quaking time of night,
And they dream of the weird of kings,
And tyrannies moulting, sick,
In the dreadful wind of change.

Wail no more, lonely one, mother of exiles, wail no more,
Banshee of the world--no more!
The sorrows are the world's, though art no more alone;
Thy wrongs, the world's.

John Todhunter

The Black Knight

1.

A beaten and a baffled man,
My life drags lamely day by day,
Too young to die, too old to plan,
In failure grey.

2.

The knights ride east, the knights ride west,
For ladies' tokens blithe of cheer,
Each bound upon some gallant quest;
While I rust here.

John Todhunter

The Marseillaise

What means this mighty chant, wherein its wail
Of some intolerable woe, grown strong
With sense of more intolerable wrong
Swells to a stern victorious march--a gale
Of vengeful wrath? What mean the faces pale,
The fierce resolve, the ecstatic pangs along
Life's fiery ways, the demon thoughts which throng
The gates of awe, when these wild notes assail
The sleeping of our souls ? Hear ye no more
Than the mad foam of revolution's leaven,
Than a roused people's throne-o'erwhelming tread?
Hark! 'tis man's spirit thundering on the shore
Of iron fate; the tramp of Titans dread,
Sworn to dethrone the Gods unjust from Heaven.

John Todhunter