Classic Poetry Series

William Roscoe
- poems -

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William Roscoe()

He was born in Liverpool, where his father, a market gardener, kept a public house called the Bowling Green at Mount Pleasant. Roscoe left school at the age of twelve, having learned all that his schoolmaster could teach. He assisted his father in the work of the garden, but spent his leisure time on reading and study. "This mode of life," he says, "gave health and vigour to my body, and amusement and instruction to my mind; and to this day I well remember the delicious sleep which succeeded my labors, from which I was again called at an early hour. If I were now asked whom I consider to be the happiest of the human race, I should answer, those who cultivate the earth by their own hands." At fifteen he began to look for a suitable career. A month's trial of bookselling was unsuccessful, and in 1769 he was articled to a solicitor. Although a diligent student of law, he continued to read the classics, and made the acquaintance with the language and literature of Italy which was to dominate his life.

His poem, Mount Pleasant, was written when he was sixteen, and together with other verses, now forgotten, won the esteem of good critics. In 1774 he went into business as a lawyer, and in 1781 married Jane, second daughter of William Griffies, a Liverpool tradesman; they had seven sons and three daughters. Roscoe had the courage to denounce the African slave trade in his native town, where much of the wealth came from slavery. He wrote a long poem published in two parts called The Wrongs of Africa (1787-1788), and entered into a controversy with an ex-Roman Catholic priest called Fr Raymond Harris, who tried to justify the slave trade through the Bible(and was generously paid for his efforts by Liverpool businessmen involved with the slave trade). Roscoe also wrote a pamphlet in 1788 entitled 'A General View of the African Slave Trade'. Roscoe was also a political pamphleteer, and like many other Liberals of the day hailed the promise of liberty in the French Revolution.

Meanwhile he had pursued his Italian studies, and had carried out research, which resulted in his Life of Lorenzo de' Medici, which appeared in 1796, and gained him a reputation among contemporary historians. It was often reprinted, and translations in French, German and other languages show that its popularity was not confined to Britain. Angelo Fabroni, who had intended to translate his own Latin life of Lorenzo, abandoned the idea and persuaded Gaetano Mecherini to undertake an Italian version of Roscoe's work.

Roscoe was a Unitarian and Presbyterian. His outspokenness against the slave trade meant that abolitionism and Presbyterianism were linked together in the public mind.

In 1796 Roscoe gave up legal practice, and toyed with the idea of going to the bar. Between 1793 and 1800 he paid much attention to agriculture, and helped to reclaim Chat Moss, near Manchester. He also succeeded in restoring to good order the affairs of a banking house in which his friend William Clark, then resident in Italy, was a partner. This led to his introduction to the business, which eventually proved disastrous. His translation of Luigi Tansillo's Nurse appeared in 1798, and went through several editions. It is dedicated in a sonnet to his wife, who had practised the precepts of the Italian poet.

The Life and Pontificate of Leo the Tenth appeared in 1805, and was a natural sequel to his previous work of history. The new work, whilst it maintained its author's fame, did not meet with so favourable a reception as the Life of Lorenzo. It was frequently reprinted, and the insertion of the Italian translation in the Index did not prevent its circulation even in the papal states. Roscoe was elected member of parliament for Liverpool in 1806, but the House of Commons was not for him, and at the dissolution in the following year he stood down. During his brief stay however, he was able to cast his vote in favour of the successful abolition of the slave trade.

The commercial troubles of 1816 brought into difficulties the banking house with which he was connected, and forced the sale of his collection of books and pictures. It was on this occasion that he wrote the fine Sonnet on Parting with his Books.

Dr SH Spiker, the king of Prussia's librarian, visited Roscoe at this difficult time. Roscoe said he still desired to write a biography of Erasmus but lacked both leisure and youth. The project was never carried out. After five years struggling to discharge the liabilities of the bank, the action of a small number of creditors forced the partners into bankruptcy in 1820. For a time Roscoe was in danger of arrest, but ultimately he received honourable discharge. On the dispersal of his library, the volumes most useful to him were secured by friends and placed in the Liverpool Athenaeum. The sum of £2500 was also invested for his benefit.

Having now resigned commercial pursuits entirely, he found a pleasant task in the arrangement of the great library at Holkham, the property of his friend Thomas Coke. In 1822 he issued an appendix of illustrations to his Lorenzo and also a Memoir of Richard Robert Jones of Aberdaron, a remarkable self-taught linguist. The year 1824 was memorable for the death of his wife and the publication of his edition of the works of Alexander Pope, which involved him in a controversy with William Lisle Bowles. His versatility was shown by the appearance of a folio monograph on the Monandrian Plants, which was published

in 1828. The last part came out after his recovery from a stroke.

Roscoe showed considerable moral courage as well as devotion to study. He had many friends. Posterity is not likely to endorse the verdict of Horace Walpole, who thought Roscoe the best of our historians, but his books on Lorenzo de' Medici and Pope Leo X remained important contributions to historical literature. In addition to these, Roscoe wrote tracts on penal jurisprudence, and contributed to the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature and of the Linnean Society. The first collected edition of his Poetical Works was published in 1857, and is sadly incomplete, omitting, with other verses known to be from his pen, the Butterfly's Ball, a fantasy, which has charmed thousands of children since it appeared in 1807. Other verses are in Poems for Youth, by a Family Circle (1820).

The Life by his son Henry Roscoe (2 vols., London, 1906) contains full details of Roscoe's career, and there are references to him in the Autobiographical Sketches of De Quincey, and in Washington Irving's Sketch Book.

Roscoe and his wife had seven sons and three daughters, including William Stanley Roscoe (1782–1843), a poet, Thomas Roscoe (1791–1871), translator from Italian, and Henry (1800-1836), a legal writer who wrote his father's biography. Henry's son Henry Enfield Roscoe (1833–1915) was a chemist and vice-chancellor of the University of London.

Earth

SAD is my lot; among the shining spheres
Wheeling, I weave incessant day and night,
And ever, in my never-ending flight,
Add woes to woes, and count up tears on tears.
Young wives’ and new-born infants’ hapless biers
Lie on my breast, a melancholy sight;
Fresh griefs abhor my fresh returning light;
Pain and remorse and want fill up my years.
My happier children’s farther-piercing eyes
Into the blessed solvent future climb,
And knit the threads of joy and hope and warning;
But I, the ancient mother, am not wise,
And, shut within the blind obscure of time,
Roll on from morn to night, and on from night to morning.

William Roscoe

The Butterfly's Ball And The Grasshopper's Feast

Come take up your Hats, and away let us haste
To the Butterfly's Ball, and the Grasshopper's Feast.
The Trumpeter, Gad-fly, has summon'd the Crew,
And the Revels are now only waiting for you.

So said little Robert, and pacing along,
His merry Companions came forth in a Throng.
And on the smooth Grass, by the side of a Wood,
Beneath a broad Oak that for Ages had stood,

Saw the Children of Earth, and the Tenants of Air,
For an Evening's Amusement together repair.
And there came the Beetle, so blind and so black,
Who carried the Emmet, his Friend, on his Back.

And there was the Gnat and the Dragon-fly too,
With all their Relations, Green, Orange, and Blue.
And there came the Moth, with his Plumage of Down,
And the Hornet in Jacket of Yellow and Brown;

Who with him the Wasp, his Companion, did bring,
But they promis'd, that Evening, to lay by their Sting.
And the sly little Dormouse crept out of his Hole,
And brought to the Feast his blind Brother, the Mole.

And the Snail, with his Horns peeping out of his Shell,
Came from a great Distance, the Length of an Ell.
A Mushroom their Table, and on it was laid
A Water-dock Leaf, which a Table-cloth made.

The Viands were various, to each of their Taste,
And the Bee brought her Honey to crown the Repast.
Then close on his Haunches, so solemn and wise,
The Frog from a Corner, look'd up to the Skies.

And the Squirrel well pleas'd such Diversions to see,
Mounted high over Head, and look'd down from a Tree.
Then out came the Spider, with Finger so fine,
To shew his Dexterity on the tight Line.

From one Branch to another, his Cobwebs he slung,
Then quick as an Arrow he darted along,
But just in the Middle, -- Oh! shocking to tell,
From his Rope, in an Instant, poor Harlequin fell.

Yet he touch'd not the Ground, but with Talons outspread,
Hung suspended in Air, at the End of a Thread,
Then the Grasshopper came with a Jerk and a Spring,
Very long was his Leg, though but short was his Wing;

He took but three Leaps, and was soon out of Sight,
Then chirp'd his own Praises the rest of the Night.
With Step so majestic the Snail did advance,
And promis'd the Gazers a Minuet to dance.

But they all laugh'd so loud that he pull'd in his Head,
And went in his own little Chamber to Bed.
Then, as Evening gave Way to the Shadows of Night,
Their Watchman, the Glow-worm, came out with a Light.

Then Home let us hasten, while yet we can see,
For no Watchman is waiting for you and for me.
So said little Robert, and pacing along,
His merry Companions returned in a Throng.

William Roscoe

The Master-Chord

LIKE a musician that with flying finger
Startles the voice of some new instrument,
And, though he know that in one string are blent
All its extremes of sound, yet still doth linger
Among the lighter threads, fearing to start
The deep soul of that one melodious wire,
Lest it, unanswering, dash his high desire,
And spoil the hopes of his expectant heart;
Thus, with my mistress oft conversing, I
Stir every lighter theme with careless voice,
Gathering sweet music and celestial joys
From the harmonious soul o’er which I fly;
Yet o’er the one deep master-chord I hover,
And dare not stoop, fearing to tell—I love her.

William Roscoe

To La Sansoeur

I KNOW not how to call you light,
Since I myself was lighter;
Nor can you blame my changing plight
Who were the first inviter.

I know not which began to range
Since we were never constant;
And each when each began to change
Was found a weak remonstrant.

But this I know, the God of Love
Both shake his hand against us,
And scorning says we ne’er did prove
True passion—but pretences.

William Roscoe