

## THEODORE O'HARA.



THEODORE O'HARA.  
O'HARA'S GRAVESTONE.

IT is purposed here to sketch briefly the life of a Southern soldier who builded for himself an enduring fame as a poet, upon four lines.

These lines, together with other stanzas of the poem in which they occur, may be seen in the national cemeteries of the United States, cast in iron and placed

along the silent ways which wander among the dead, to commemorate the sleeping brave of North and South alike; and these four immortal lines, which have sufficed to secure their author's name a place in the sacred annals, are inscribed also over the gateway of the National Cemetery at Washington. Though the man who wrote them fought upon the opposing side, even to the end, these lines seem no whit less fitting here than when we find them placed above the wearers of the gray who rest in the cemetery at New Orleans. Thus does the spirit of poesy triumph over material issues, appealing to something within us before which mere differences of political opinion, strong and abiding as they seem to be, sink out of sight and are lost forever. To forget the questions upon which they have been divided to their hurt, let men cherish those truths upon which they are one.

Theodore O'Hara, soldier, poet, and journalist, was born in Danville, Kentucky, February 11, 1820. He was the son of Kane O'Hara, an Irish gentleman who, after having left his own land on account of political oppression, became distinguished in Kentucky as an educator of great learning and ability. The family finally settled in the vicinity of Frankfort, Kentucky. After being prepared under the teaching of his father, Theodore was sent to St. Joseph's College at Bardstown, Kentucky, where he graduated with high honors. After this he practiced law for a time, but in 1845 he held a position in the Treasury Department at Washington, and the next year was appointed captain in the old United States Army.

He served through the Mexican War and was

brevetted major on the field for gallantry and meritorious conduct. He then practiced law in Washington for a time, but when Lopez attempted the liberation of Cuba, O'Hara joined the expedition and led a regiment at Cardenas, in which battle he was severely wounded. Subsequently he was concerned in Walker's adventurous expedition to Central America. He afterwards conducted several newspapers in the South with great ability and brilliancy—among them the "Mobile Register."

At the beginning of the War of the Rebellion he joined the service at once, and was put in command of the fort at the entrance of Mobile Bay, which he bravely defended until ordered to retire. After this he served on Albert Sidney Johnston's staff, and was beside that officer when he fell at Shiloh. Later on he was chief-of-staff to General John C. Breckinridge, and was in the famous charge at Stone River. He served as chief-of-staff until the end of the war. After the war he engaged in some commercial transactions in Columbus, Georgia, but finally retired to a plantation on the Alabama side of the Chattahoochee River, where he died of fever on the 7th of June, 1867. In 1873 the legislature of Kentucky provided for the bringing back of his body to his native State, and in 1874 he was buried with military honors in the State Cemetery at Frankfort. This is a brief record of O'Hara's life.

Fond of adventure, full of restless energy, and of a daring disposition, he was essentially the soldier of fortune, possessed of the impulsive spirit which induces one to stake all on the hazard of a die rather than to attain by painful and persistent effort. But rich as he seems to have been in the great and many gifts of mind and heart which distinguished him, I cannot see that O'Hara was ambitious—unless for military distinction. It may be that the Muses did haunt his every step, weaving about each scene the witchery of idealism and romance so enchanting to the poetic mind, but they certainly did not compel him to put into living verse the varied and picturesque experiences through which he must have passed. He wrote but little. What dreams and fancies he may have failed to transcribe one can only conjecture, and these conjectures must be entertained in silence. The age is impatient of

mysteries, and listens with an incredulous ear to speculations about unknown possibilities, or to intuitive guesses which it does not understand. The world is a stickler for the tangibility of actual performance. It is, therefore, with actual performance that one must deal here.

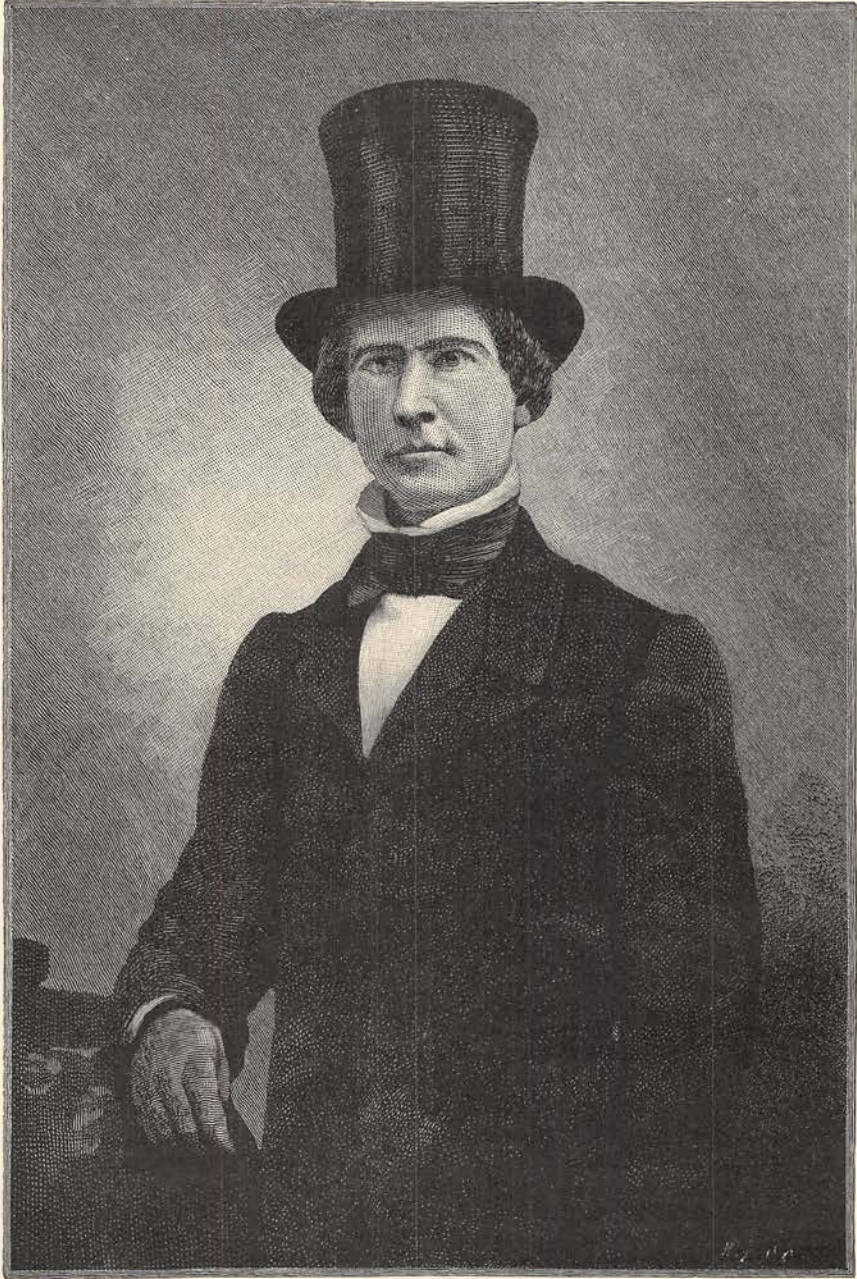
O'Hara wrote only two poems which have been preserved to history — one entitled "The Bivouac of the Dead," and one, "A Dirge for the Brave Old Pioneer." These are identical in the manner of their construction, and they are both elegiac and commemorative poems. He seems to have written only when special demand was made upon him, and then only in this one vein. It is upon this first-mentioned poem, "The Bivouac of the Dead," that O'Hara's claim for immortality must rest. It was written to commemorate the death of his comrades who fell in Mexico, and was read by him upon the occasion of their burial in the plot of ground set apart by the State for their reception in the cemetery at Frankfort. O'Hara now sleeps within the same ground, and may be said to have sung his own memorial, standing upon his unmade grave. The opening stanza of this poem, especially the second quatrain of it, remains unsurpassed in its own field.

The muffled drum's sad  
roll has beat  
The soldier's last tattoo;  
No more on life's parade  
shall meet  
That brave and fallen  
few.  
On Fame's eternal  
camping-ground  
Their silent tents are  
spread,  
But Glory guards, with  
solemn round,  
The bivouac of the  
dead.

In my opinion no amount of tinkering could improve these last four verses. They have been found fault with by some, who contend that there is no truth in the similes presented, that soldiers do not pitch their tents when they bivouac for the night; but as the first couplet plainly



SOLDIERS' MONUMENT AND TOMB OF O'HARA.



ENGRAVED BY H. VELTEN.

THEODORE O'HARA.

FROM A PRINT FROM A DAGUERRETYPE.

points the mind to an ideal and eternal camping-ground, the image of the "silent tents" follows naturally, while the second couplet refers to the sleeping bodies when they bivouac for the night of death, only until the reveille shall sound. The technical correctness of these similes is beyond question; and as to their higher poetic sense, their ideal beauty must be apparent to every appreciative mind. To one who cannot perceive this, arguments on the subject can mean nothing.

Some incidents of interest naturally attach themselves to the history of this poem. There is a peculiar completeness to the circle of events pertaining to it. O'Hara — himself a soldier — commemorates in it the death of his companions in battle, and reads it at their burial. After long years, when he had served through another war, he is himself gathered to rest beside them, and his poem, which consecrated the spot, has become a fitting and enduring monument for himself. It is not of equal merit throughout, but there are many lines only less stirring and impressive than those already given.

The neighing troop, the flashing blade  
The bugle's stirring blast,  
The charge, the dreadful cannonade.

These lines suggest the onward, resistless rush of a mountain torrent; the images which appear before the mind are quickly replaced. The picture is fleeting but vivid, and the touch is broad and masterful. Note how the emphasis is thrown upon the word "charge": one can hear the command ringing along the expectant lines, and can well imagine how the thrill of battle must have shot through each heart within

Those breasts that never more may feel  
The rapture of the fight.

The other poem contains nothing approaching the verses I have quoted.

The place of O'Hara's burial is worth transcribing. I will, however, attempt but a glimpse of it here. At the moment in which I write, the slanting sunlight of a waning November day comes across the marble-dotted slopes and mounds, which are as green as an April hill, and the soft south wind makes a low moaning in the needled branches of the pines, whose dark clusters are here and there relieved by the pale dead gold of the changing cypress and the deeper color of the shimmering beech, and at rarer intervals by leafless dogwood trees all aglow with scarlet berries. Out under the darkening masses, through the half-open barrier of tree trunks, one may catch glimpses of the far-off hills, above which burns the golden

glory of the sinking sun. At times there comes the faint tinkling of distant bells from where the cattle return to the valley, in which sleeps the unseen city. Far up above the fine tracing of the naked elms, gold-tipped clouds of delicate purple drift through the gray green of the sky. Close by — beside the tomb of O'Hara, with its sculptured sword and scabbard and encircling wreath of oak and laurel — bends a rose-bush whose late blooms touch listlessly with their pale lips the cold and unresponsive marble. A little way off rises the great memorial shaft surmounted by marble cannons and flags, and above these by the winged figure of Victory; and here, among the graves of those who once listened to their angry roar, stand the blackened and silent guns which belched forth death and flame at Buena Vista and Chapultepec — grim guardians now of the quiet warriors who have met the last enemy. A soft radiance suffuses the scene, and the last rays of the sun just touch the wings of Victory where she seems to sway against the clouds. It is here that the full import and beauty of O'Hara's lines may be felt; for, as the hush of evening deepens, one can fancy he hears the slow and measured tread as the majestic figure of Glory keeps on her ceaseless round by this bivouac of the dead, and afar on the eternal camping-ground of Fame the imagination pictures the "silent tents" in which the departed souls rest forever upon the peaceful fields of the hereafter.

O'Hara is lovingly remembered by thousands who knew him personally. He was genial and generous in disposition, and possessing a mind well stored both from books and with the experiences of an adventurous life, he is said to have been exceedingly happy and brilliant in conversation, having a clear sense of humor, a nimble wit, and a quick tongue at repartee. He was the life and soul of many a camp-fire circle in the wars, and the many varied incidents of his life which cannot be given here, for lack of space, all show him to have been utterly fearless. His impulsive and daring nature made him thirst continually for the excitements of danger, and gave him relish for the chances of the fight. Sensitive and refined himself, his manner towards others, while characterized by an inherent, self-respecting pride, was sufficiently unreserved and hearty, and without the tinge of any belittling vanity or shadow of ostentation. He was something above the medium in stature, slender, graceful, and well proportioned in figure, very erect and military in his bearing, and quick, wiry, and decisive in his movements. His hair was black, jet black, and his eyes so nearly so that there was but a shade of difference. They were full of alert intelligence, indicating in every glance

the vital force and restlessness of his nature. His nose was straight and his mouth was somewhat small; the lips, seeming always close pressed together or slightly "pursed," were almost feminine in their clearness and delicacy of outline, but showed great firmness and determination as well as refinement. His head was nicely poised and well set on his shoulders, and his hands and feet were very small and well cared for. He died seemingly unconscious of his highest gifts, his greatest fault being his neglecting to follow steadily some definite aim — if that be a fault. Since then the hand of Time, grappling for hidden treasure amidst the ruins of lost and buried incident and circumstance, has saved from the wreck of this life a few lines only,—written when he was thinking more of others than of himself,—but lines of such transcendent merit that they have fixed the name of Theodore O'Hara in history.

*Robert Burns Wilson.*

#### THE BIVOUAC OF THE DEAD.

BY THEODORE O'HARA.

THE muffled drum's sad roll has beat  
The soldier's last tattoo;  
No more on life's parade shall meet  
That brave and fallen few.  
On Fame's eternal camping-ground  
Their silent tents are spread,  
But Glory guards, with solemn round,  
The bivouac of the dead.

No rumor of the foe's advance  
Now swells upon the wind;  
No troubled thought at midnight haunts  
Of loved ones left behind;  
No vision of the morrow's strife  
The warrior's dream alarms;  
No braying horn nor screaming file  
At dawn shall call to arms.

Their shivered swords are red with rust,  
Their pluméd heads are bowed;  
Their haughty banner, trailed in dust,  
Is now their martial shroud.  
And plenteous funeral tears have washed  
The red stains from each brow,  
And the proud forms, by battle gashed,  
Are free from anguish now.

The neighing troop, the flashing blade,  
The bugle's stirring blast,  
The charge, the dreadful cannonade,  
The din and shout are past;  
Nor war's wild note, nor glory's peal,  
Shall thrill with fierce delight  
Those breasts that never more may feel  
The rapture of the fight.

Like the fierce northern hurricane  
That sweeps his great plateau,

Flushed with the triumph yet to gain,  
Came down the serried foe.  
Who heard the thunder of the fray  
Break o'er the field beneath,  
Knew well the watchword of that day  
Was "Victory or death."

Long has the doubtful conflict raged  
O'er all that stricken plain,  
For never fiercer fight had waged  
The vengeful blood of Spain;  
And still the storm of battle blew,  
Still swelled the gory tide;  
Not long our stout old chieftain knew,  
Such odds his strength could bide.

'T was in that hour his stern command  
Called to a martyr's grave  
The flower of his beloved land,  
The nation's flag to save.  
By rivers of their fathers' gore  
His first-born laurels grew,  
And well he deemed the sons would pour  
Their lives for glory too.

Full many a norther's breath has swept  
O'er Angostura's plain —  
And long the pitying sky has wept  
Above the moldering slain.  
The raven's scream, or eagle's flight,  
Or shepherd's pensive lay,  
Alone awakes each sullen height  
That frowned o'er that dread fray.

Sons of the Dark and Bloody Ground,  
Ye must not slumber there,  
Where stranger steps and tongues resound  
Along the heedless air.  
Your own proud land's heroic soil  
Shall be your fitter grave;  
She claims from War his richest spoil —  
The ashes of her brave.

Thus 'neath their parent turf they rest,  
Far from the gory field,  
Borne to a Spartan mother's breast  
On many a bloody shield;  
The sunshine of their native sky  
Smiles sadly on them here,  
And kindred eyes and hearts watch by  
The heroes' sepulcher.

Rest on, embalmed and sainted dead,  
Dear as the blood ye gave,  
No impious footstep here shall tread  
The herbage of your grave;  
Nor shall your glory be forgot  
While Fame her record keeps,  
Or Honor points the hallowed spot  
Where Valor proudly sleeps.

Yon marble minstrel's voiceless stone  
In deathless song shall tell  
When many a vanquished age hath flown,  
The story how ye fell;  
Nor wreck, nor change, nor winter's blight,  
Nor Time's remorseless doom,  
Shall dim one ray of glory's light  
That gilds your deathless tomb.