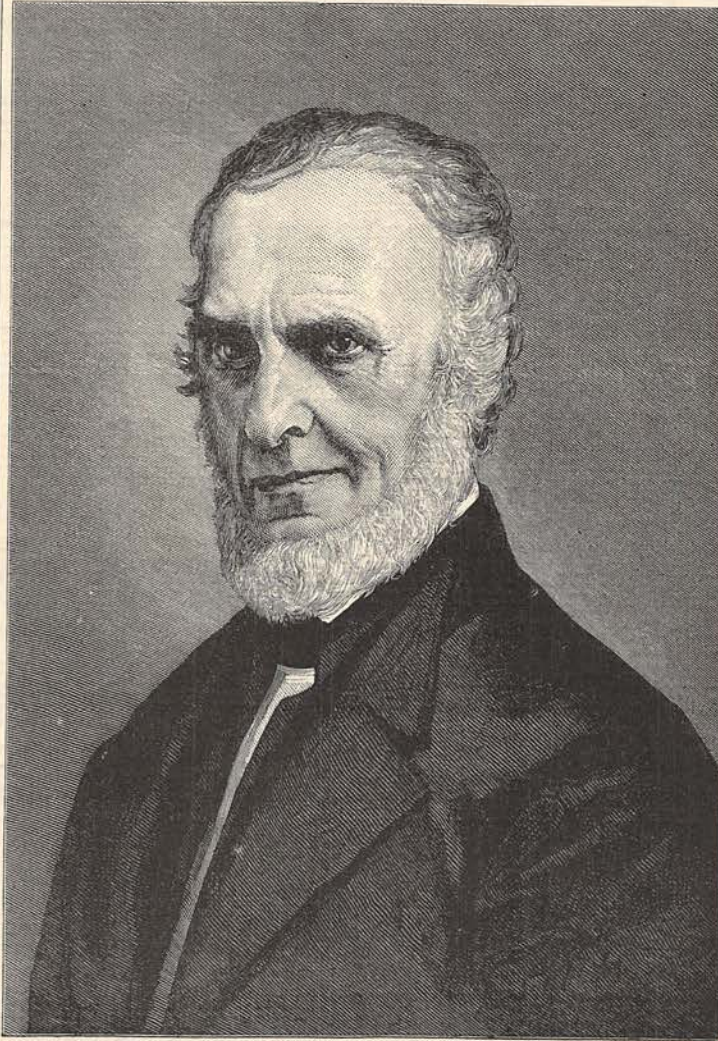


## THE AMERICAN POET WHITTIER.

BY H. SAVILE CLARKE.



WHITTIER.

*(Engraved by R. Taylor from a Photograph of the original Painting in the possession of Fred. Bruckmann, Munich.)*

**T**HE European fame of Longfellow and his extraordinary popularity in this country has overshadowed the laurels of most of the other poets of America. Edgar Allan Poe, it is true, is widely known, chiefly by one remarkable poem, "The Raven," but comparatively few people here are well read in the works of Emerson, Bryant, Lowell, Wendell Holmes, or the Quaker poet Whittier.

Thus when the latter was mentioned the other day as having said that he would like to appeal to Lord Tennyson for an epitaph upon Gordon, and the laureate responded with a quatrain that has been largely quoted in the newspapers, many readers may have wondered who Whittier was, and what his rank among the poets of our time. Thus, then, some brief answer to those questions may not be uninteresting.

for Whittier is not only a very genuine poet, but a remarkable man; while his verse is perhaps the most thoroughly and distinctively American of any that has come to us from the other side of the Atlantic.

John Greenleaf Whittier was born in a farm-house near Haverhill, on the Merrimac river, Massachusetts, on December 17th, 1807. His parents, who had been settled there for some generations, were members of the Society of Friends, and to the tenets of that religious community the poet has adhered all his life, while its teachings have to a certain extent coloured his verse. Whittier was brought up at home and worked on the farm, receiving only a limited amount of schooling, mainly in the intervals of labour, but he appears to have learned a little Latin, and to have been fairly well grounded in English. He seems at all events to have received sufficient education to teach a little himself, and to take to journalism as soon as he came of age, since for some time he wrote articles and verses for various papers while also engaged in managing a farm of his own. In 1836, as Mr. Stedman says, Whittier "received a call." William Lloyd Garrison started *The Liberator*, an anti-slavery organ, and henceforward Whittier's most earnest energies and his most impassioned verses were at the service of those who fearlessly denounced the national curse of America. He was the laureate of the anti-slavery crusade; and it is important to remember that, as Bryant pointed out afterwards, he championed the slave when to say anything against slavery was "to draw upon oneself the bitterest hatred, loathing, and contempt of the great majority of men throughout the land." Mr. Lowell, in "A Fable for Critics," has given expression to similar praise. He says of Whittier:

"All honour and praise to the right-hearted bard  
Who was true to the voice when such service was hard,  
Who himself was so free he dared sing for the slave  
When to look but a protest in silence was brave."

We need not detail Mr. Whittier's achievements in the anti-slavery cause. Suffice it to say he occupied an official position in the Anti-slavery Society, that he worked heart and soul for abolition, and that some of his most stirring poems were written to advance the cause of freedom. Indeed, he seems at first to have valued his poetic gift mainly as a means of propagating his fearless opinions, for he makes the avowal, "I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-slavery Declaration of 1833 than on the title-page of my book."

Here, surely, is a writer whose career should appeal most forcibly to the sympathies of Englishmen. And when we find that the veteran poet is a man of blameless character, who, having accomplished his great work in the world, lives quietly in his retired home, at times solacing himself with composition, and that he is loved and honoured throughout the length and breadth of the great American continent as truly the "Prophet Bard," we may well take such a man to our hearts. He too is willing to claim kinship with the mother country. Has he not sung:

"O Englishmen!—in hope and creed,  
In blood and tongue our brothers!

We too are heirs of Runnymede;  
And Shakespeare's fame and Cromwell's deed  
Are not alone our mother's.

"'Thicker than water,' in one rill,  
Through centuries of story,  
Our Saxon blood has flowed, and still  
We share with you its good and ill,  
The shadow and the glory."

The characteristics of Whittier's verse are a perfect naturalness and simplicity, combined with rugged fervour. He is not like some of our modern poets, who, having nothing very striking to say, are very particular as to how they say it. With him the poetic message is more important than the mould in which it is cast, though, like all true poets, he is not without supreme felicities of expression, while his verse glows at all times with genuine feeling. He is at his best, as might be expected of such a man, as a writer of ballads, and when his lyrics breathe aspirations for freedom; but he is not without tenderness and a heart-felt appreciation of the beauties of nature; he can be satirical too on occasion, and yet his verse is also remarkable for religious fervour, almost Hebraic in its simplicity.

We may pass over Whittier's earlier poems, such as "Mogg Megone" and other Indian legends, which, though interesting and eminently picturesque, hardly show the poet at his best, and come to the New England poems, first of which is the touching ballad of "Cassandra Southwick." The "Quaker maid" is persecuted and offered for sale by

"—dark and haughty Eadicott, the ruler of the land;"

but one of the old sea-captains speaks out:

"Pile my ship with bars of silver, pack with coins of Spanish gold,  
From keel-piece up to deck-plank, the roomage of her hold;  
By the living God who made me! I would sooner in your bay  
Sink ship, and crew, and cargo, than bear this child away!"

So the poor girl goes free, and her voice rises to heaven in some beautiful verses, of which we will quote one:

"Thanksgiving to the Lord of Life!—to Him all praises be,  
Who from the hands of evil men hath set His hand-maid free;  
All praise to Him before whose power the mighty are afraid,  
Who takes the crafty in the snare which for the poor is laid."

Very fine and weird is the ballad of "The Garrison of Cape Ann," which saw at night a spectral host beleaguering the walls. Human might was of no avail, but the vision vanished at the words of prayer, and the ballad concludes with these stanzas:

"So to us who walk in summer through the cool and sea-blown town,  
From the childhood of its people comes the solemn legend down;  
Not in vain the ancient fiction, in whose moral lives the youth  
And the fitness and the freshness of an undecaying truth.

"Soon or late to all our dwellings come the spectres of the mind,  
Doubts and fears, and dread forebodings, in the darkness undefined;  
Round us throng the grim projections of the heart and of the brain,  
And our pride of strength is weakness, and the cunning hand is vain.

"In the dark we cry like children, and no answer from on high  
Breaks the crystal spheres of silence, and no white wings downward fly;  
But the heavenly help we pray for comes to faith, and not to sight,  
And our prayers themselves drive backward all the spirits of the night!"

Let us turn now to the "Voices of Freedom." We pity the man or woman who can read such lines as these without a thrill. Here is a verse from one of these poems:

"What ho! *our* countrymen in chains!  
 The whip on WOMAN'S shrinking flesh!  
*Our* soil yet reddening from the stains  
 Caught from her scourging, warm and fresh!  
 What! mothers from their children riven!  
 What! God's own image bought and sold!  
 AMERICANS to market driven,  
 And bartered as the brute for gold!"

Here again are the first and concluding stanzas of "The Christian Slave"—an auctioneer having recommended a woman on the stand as "a good Christian":

"A Christian! going, gone!  
 Who bids for God's own image;—for His grace  
 Which that poor victim of the market-place  
 Hath in her suffering won?"

"My God! can such things be?  
 Hast Thou not said that whatsoever is done  
 Unto Thy weakest and Thy humblest one,  
 Is even done to Thee?"

"Hoarse, horrible, and strong,  
 Rises to heaven the agonising cry,  
 Filling the arches of the hollow sky,  
 HOW LONG, O GOD, HOW LONG?"

Trenchant and telling is the satire in "A Sabbath Scene," which tells how a female slave sought refuge in a church:

"She saw the white spire through the trees,  
 She heard the sweet hymn swelling;  
 O pitying Christ! a refuge give  
 That poor one in Thy dwelling."

Service is going on, but there is no sanctuary for the slave even at the altar, and the parson cries out to the pursuing slave-owner—

"Of course I know your right divine,  
 To own and work and whip her;  
 Quick, deacon, throw that Polyglot  
 Before the wench, and trip her!"

So the girl is captured, and the poet tells us how:

"Shriek rose on shriek, the Sabbath air  
 Her wild cries tore asunder;  
 I listened with hushed breath to hear  
 God answering with His thunder."

A stirring appeal to Massachusetts will be found in "The Pine Tree," the emblem of the Bay State, as it is called. We quote one stanza:

"Tell us not of banks and tariffs, cease your paltry pedler cries;  
 Shall the good State sink her honour that your gambling stocks may rise?  
 Would ye barter man for cotton? That your gains may sum up higher,  
 Must we kiss the feet of Moloch, pass our children through the fire?  
 Is the dollar only real? God and truth and right a dream?  
 Weighed against your lying ledgers must our manhood kick the beam?"

Terrible are the poet's denunciations of the clergy of all denominations who lent their sanction to a great pro-slavery meeting in Charlestown in 1835:

"Just God! and these are they  
 Who minister at Thine altar, God of Right—  
 Men who their hands with prayer and blessing lay  
 On Israel's ark of light."

"What! servants of Thy own  
 Merciful Son, who came to seek and save  
 The homeless and the outcast, fettering down  
 The tasked and plundered slave!"

We are tempted to quote more of these powerful poems, struck off as it were at white heat, and full of the most impassioned pleading and burning denuncia-

tion, that must, one would think, have done not a little for the sacred cause of freedom; but we must pass on to other phases of our poet's mind.

In a very different style to any of the foregoing are "The New Wife and the Old," a very weird and impressive poem, and some translations, one from the Danish, entitled "King Volmer and Elsie," being especially charming. "Maud Muller" is perhaps the best known and most often quoted in this country of any of Whittier's poems, so we shall give no extract from it here. It is pretty, but that is all that can fairly be said for it. Full of pathos is "Annie and Rhoda." One sister has a lover, and in the dead of night the younger one hears him call upon her name, as he is drowned at sea. "Thou liest," says the elder girl; "he never would call thy name."

"If he did, I would pray the wind and sea  
 To keep him ever from thee and me."

But the younger girl is certain her sister's betrothed is dead, and she can now avow the love she had never told. The poem ends thus:

"The wind and the waves their work have done;  
 We shall see him no more beneath the sun."

"Little will reck that heart of thine;  
 It loved him not with a love like mine."

"I, for his sake, were he but here,  
 Could hem and broider thy bridal gear,"

"Though hands should tremble, and eyes be wet,  
 And stitch for stitch in my heart be set."

"But now my soul with his soul I wed—  
 Thine the living and mine the dead!"

It would be easy to quote a score more poems, but we can only refer the reader, who may not have the time to discover the especial beauties of Whittier for himself, to such pieces as "Elliott," "Barbara Frietchie," "From Perugia," "The Haschish," "To Pius IX.," "The Branded Hand," "The Slaves of Martinique," "Marguerite," "Le Marais du Cygne," and "Questions of Life." Once again, however, our poet shall speak for himself in the stately verse of "The Centennial Hymn," which begins:

"Our fathers' God, from out whose hand  
 The centuries fall like grains of sand,"

and concludes as follows:

"O, make Thou us, through centuries long,  
 In peace secure, in justice strong;  
 Around our gift of freedom draw  
 The safeguards of Thy righteous law;  
 And, cast in some diviner mould,  
 Let the new cycle shame the old!"

No American author has done more to carry out the aspirations of those last two lines than Whittier himself. "The primitive life, the old struggle for liberty," remarks Mr. Stedman, "are idealised in his strains." And it may be added also that no one saw with a clearer vision what the "new cycle" should bring forth. In closing this paper, it may be said that the purpose of the present writer will be amply fulfilled if this inadequate notice of Whittier's noble poems and still nobler life should serve in any way to make both better known in the homes of England.