

D'Arcy McGee's Poetry; Its Place in his Biography

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It is rare to find a politician who is also a poet. When, as in the case of D'Arcy McGee, he leaves a large collection of poetry⁷ ranging from the poor to the excellent what is the biographer to do about it? Poetry gives an intimate insight into the writer's nature; it is intense, it is the essence of his character. The biographer dare not neglect them, but how far can he relate his subject's poems to the facts of his subject's life? Poetry is not a diary. It is an exercise of the imagination.

When D'Arcy McGee in the last year of his life writes "But you will see what I am banned / No more for my youth's sins to see / My Derry's oak in council stand"¹ we know this is not to be taken literally. In his later years he was not banned from Ireland, but there had been a time when he was. The poem shows that McGee still had poignant memories of an earlier period of his life.

On the other hand when he writes "Oh! blessed Isle, a weary wight / In body and in spirit, / Last year amid your pious ranks / Deplored his deep demerit"² we have a precise reference to time – "last year." When McGee calls this poem "Lough Derg; a Recollection of Donegal" and when we know that he visited Donegal in the summer of 1848 just before he fled to America, it is safe to assume that "last year" refers to 1848 and this poem was written soon after he arrived in America. "Though sorrow for the unfought fight" continues McGee,

And grief for the captive man
Peopled his soul like visions
That cloud a crystal sleep,
These sorrows there passed from him —

This poem of four long stanzas is full of exact details of the shrine at Lough Derg. It describes not only a mood but the reasons for the mood, and is obviously an incident of his journey to Donegal of which there is no other record. But this poem is rare, indeed unique, in the collection. A poem expresses a state of mind brought about by a set of circumstances. It is not expected to describe the circumstances.

Possessing only the most meagre facts of Shakespeare's life, certain modern scholars have gone to great lengths to reconstruct his biography from his plays and especially his sonnets. Even without accepting *in toto* the reconstruction, the reader of, for example, Ivor Brown's study of Shakespeare cannot help but be impressed by the personal quality that expert literary analysis uncovers in much of Shakespeare's work. The biographer of D'Arcy McGee is not under the necessity of such complicated reconstruction. We have an abundance of facts about him. The poetry, from a biographical point of view, need be read only as an expression of moods and ideas.

* All poems are cited from *The Poems of Thomas D'Arcy McGee*, edited with introduction and biographical sketch by Mrs. J. Sadlier, New York, D. & J. Sadlier Co., 1869.

¹ *Iona to Erin*, p. 221.

² *Lough Derg*, p. 482.

Even though he died young, D'Arcy McGee was in politics for twenty-five years. He was in public life, one way or another, from the time he was eighteen. Nevertheless from an even earlier age he saw his vocation not as a politician but as a bard. Originally the member of the tribal society whose function was to praise and to record, the bard, along with other clannish and tribal attributes, survived in Ireland through centuries of changing fortunes.

"Twas something then to be a bard," said McGee of the original position.

In long gone days when he who bore
The potent harp from hall to hall,
His courier running on before,
His castle where he chose to call;
Twas something then to be a bard.
When seated by the chieftain's chair,
The minstrel told his pictured tale,
Of whence they came and who they were,
The ancient stock of Innisfail —³

To tell people whence they came and who they were. That was the essential function of the bard and in the broadest sense it is the purpose of all literature. McGee never summed up the bardic vocation better, although it was one he explored from many angles in his poetry.

The three functions of the bard are set forth in "The Three Minstrels":

One sings of war, the martial strain sublime,
The second minstrel sadly doth begin
To indite his mistress fair, but cruel,
The third of Country and of Duty sings:
Slow and triumphal is the solemn strain;
Like death, he takes no heed of chiefs or kings,
But over all he maketh Country reign.
Choose which ye will—the martial song sublime,
Or lover fond; but thou my Master be,
O Bard of Duty and of Country's cause!⁴

The bard who, like death, takes no heed of chiefs or kings is a far cry from the tribal bard who praised their deeds and accepted their patronage. This bard is a fiery nationalist of 1848 vintage and belongs to the Young Ireland period of McGee's life. A few years later he endows the bard with more subtle qualities than those of the troubadour or the patriot.

Writing in 1855 of Gerald Griffin, a Munster poet and novelist of the early nineteenth century, McGee tells the people of Munster:

He was an echo, dwelling
Amid your mountains, all their secrets telling,
Their mem'ries, their traditions, and their wrongs,
The story of their sins — the music of their songs.⁵

Griffin, he tells the Munster men 'Fixed the broad Shannon in its course forever, / And bade it flow for aye, a genius-haunted river.'" While this describes a popular literature, it could never be mistaken for nationalist propaganda.

³ *Twas Something Then to Be a Bard*, p. 284.

⁴ *The Three Minstrels*, p. 63.

⁵ *Monody on the Death of Gerald Griffin*, p. 436.

About himself as a bard McGee is modest and diffident to a degree that requires some explanation. We will consider this later in another context.

Between the years 1845-1848 McGee went through successive phases of extravagant nationalism, and angry patriotism ending in defeat and exile. "I see my idol — Liberty, that wears the smile of Love." He goes on to describe the pilgrims who come to her shrine.

The Artist, with his battle piece — the Poet, with his song
The Student, with his glowing heart, pour to the shrine along,⁶

"Soul of my race! Soul eternal!" begins another effusion,

Oh hear me, Oh cheer me, be near me,
I'm all clay when thou, Soul, art away.⁷

Students turn up frequently in the poems of the Irish period, which is natural as McGee himself was only about twenty years old. In a curiously motivated group of students one works "with heart of regicide, / To level all earth's lore; / And one for love, and one for pride, / And one for more — far more!" This last commands McGee's attention.

Heroic youth! to him it seemed
Twere joyful but to die,
In any breach above which streamed
The banner Liberty!
The scaffold-altar, prison-shrine,
Where Freedom's martyrs bled — ⁸

Here the poem is cut off abruptly. Some more mundane duty may have interrupted. The poem is never finished. But McGee has more to say on the same subject in other poems.

It is easy to die
When one's work is done —
Like Simeon, the priest,
Who saw God's Son;
— But tis hard to die
While one's native land
Has scarce strength to cry
Neath the spoiler's hand;⁹

A deed! a deed! O God, vouchsafe,
Which shall not die with me,
But which may bear my memory safe
O'er time's wreck-spotted sea, —
A deed, upon whose brow shall stand
Traced, large in lines of flame —
"This hath been done for Ireland,
Done in the days of shame!"¹⁰

⁶ *The Pilgrims of Liberty*, p. 65.

⁷ *An Invocation*, p. 170.

⁸ *The Students*, p. 490.

⁹ *It Is Easy To Die*, p. 92.

¹⁰ *Deeds Done in Days of Shame*, p. 84.

Young McGee's patriotism mounted higher and higher as the Irish cause went from bad to worse. As might be expected there is railing against England but more remarkable is how little there is of it. McGee charges the absentee and exterminating landlords with the disaster of the famine years.

The proud lords with the heavy purse
Their fathers' shame — Their people's curse —
Demons in heart, nobles in face
They dig a grave for the ancient race!¹¹

The rabbit burrows in the hill,
The fox is scarce begrudged his den,
The cattle crop the pasture still,
But our masters have "no room for men."¹²

The time would come very soon when McGee would advocate moderate measures for these evils. "In the laws lie all the cause of Ireland's misery"¹³ he wrote as early as 1851. "Let the only sword you draw / Bear the legend of the law, / Wield it less to strike than awe"¹⁴ is a sentiment from the Canadian period of his life. But in 1848 the remedies he proposed were more in the reckless spirit of the times.

The grain that grew in Ireland then,
Their own floors they did thrash on —
They lived and died like Christian men,
When fighting was the fashion.¹⁵

God speed ye, gallant shearers,
May your courage never fail,
May you thrash your foes, and send the chaff
To England on the gale!¹⁶

The revolutionary patriotism that came to white heat in Europe in 1848 was everywhere frustrated and nowhere more completely than in Ireland. The fight that was not fought, the people who would not rise, sorely tried the young patriot's patience. The tide of emigration, to him nothing but a shameful retreat, he witnessed from the American side of the Atlantic because he had been forced to join it.

Yea! they are flying hither, breathless and pale with fear,
And it not the sailing time for ships, but the winter, dark and drear;
They had rather face the waters, dark as the frown of God,
Than make a stand for race and land on their own elastic sod.¹⁷

The year 1848 marked a turning point in McGee's life. Although he had already lived in America and before he was twenty had made a name for himself, he was returning this time not

¹¹ *The Ancient Race*, p. 132.

¹² *Song of the Surplus*, p. 149.

¹³ *Midsummer*, 1851, p. 151.

¹⁴ *Along the Line*, p. 161.

¹⁵ *When Fighting Was the Fashion*, p. 95.

¹⁶ *The Reaper's Song*, p. 98.

¹⁷ *The Woful Winter*, p. 343.

I do not love all mankind — No!
The heart I have has not the room.²²

And finally some sentiments that might have won the envy of I-am-the-captain-of-my-soul
Henley.

Rob me of all the joys of sense;
Curse me with all but impotence;
Fling me upon an ocean oar;
Cast me upon a savage shore;
Slay me! but own above my bier,
“The man now gone still held, while here,
The jewel, Independence!”²³

Egerton Ryerson, carrying on a controversy with McGee at a later period, quoted some of these verses as showing an offensive brashness in McGee’s character. He failed to consider the stress and strain to which they were a reaction.

Many of the poems of his first year of exile deal with dreams. “I have a sea-going spirit haunts my sleep,”²⁴ he says. And again:

We lead two lives, estranged, apart,
By day a life of toil and care,
Till darkness comes with magic art,
And bears us through the enchanted air.²⁵

The use of dreams is more than a literary device in McGee’s poems. It occurs with a persistence that leaves no doubt that it was a common experience when he slept, or should have been sleeping, for the whole of his Irish past to press in upon him in a way that was at once a joy and a torment. Sometimes the bitterness of exile is simple homesickness.

Where’er I turned, some emblem still
Roused consciousness upon my track;
Some hill was like an Irish hill,
Some wild bird’s whistle called me back;²⁶

Occasionally he writes hopefully when he is expecting the arrival of his family.

I, too, am like a merchant
Whose wealth is on the deep; —
I think of the friend-freighted ship,
That leaves my native bay —
May the saints be its protection
Till the dawning of the day!²⁷

The first shock passes, but the theme of exile remains in McGee’s poetry. How is he to fulfil the function of an Irish bard when he is an exile? This may be the reason for his extreme

²² *False Fear of the World*, p. 488.

²³ *Independence*, p. 530.

²⁴ *Sonnet – Return*, p. 139.

²⁵ *Dream Journeys*, p. 140.

²⁶ *The Heart’s Resting-Place*, p. 127.

²⁷ *The Dawning of the Day*, p. 90.

diffidence about his poetry in contrast to his normal attitude which was not one of self disparagement. In other respects he was not unaware of his talents. But about his poetry he asks only to be lay brother to the bards.²⁸ “Seeing thee thus,” he apostrophizes the harp, “I knew the bards were gone / – Mangan and Moore, I knew were vanished; / I knelt and raised thee; did I dare too much?”²⁹ The idea of the Israelites who could not sing the songs of Sion in a strange land occurs more than once in his poems and the thought of the Psalmist, if I forget thee, Jerusalem, haunts the poems until it finds flawless expression in

If I forget thee,
Irrelagh! Irrelagh!
 If I forget thee,
Irrelagh!
 May the tongue ungrateful cleave
 To my mute mouth’s cave,
 And the hand of my body wither –
Irrelagh!
 Woe, Woe to the hand,
Irrelagh! Irrelagh!
 Woe to the guilty hand,
Irrelagh!
 The hand the godless spoiler laid
 On prayer-worn cell and sacred shade,
 And thy lustrous altars –
Irrelagh!
 I am worn and gray,
Irrelagh! Irrelagh!
 I am worn and gray
Irrelagh!
 Night and silence brooding o’er me,
 Death upon the road before me,
 While I kneel to bless thee –
Irrelagh!
 For rebuilt thou shalt be,
Irrelagh! Irrelagh!
 Rebuilt thou shalt be,
Irrelagh!
 At new altars like the old
 Shining bright with gems and gold,
 Ancient rites shall be renewed –
Irrelagh!³⁰

The first shock passes. But the fact of his exile is not something he gets over. He learns to live with it. It is no longer a traumatic experience but creates a state of tension between his early ambitions and the need to find another form for them. The cult of the idol – Liberty is now replaced definitely and finally by the Faith.

²⁸ *A Profession*, p. 157.

²⁹ *An Apology to the Harp*, p. 61.

³⁰ *Lay of the Last Monk of Macruss*, p. 306.

In the night-time I groaned on my bed, I felt,
O my Father! thy rod;
I felt all thy beauty and truth;
In the morning I rose and I said,
“I will go to the altar of God –
To God, who rejoiceth my youth.”³¹

The patriot had to have a cause and he found it among the immigrants. Even before he left Ireland he had begun to look for a purpose better founded than the pursuit of an abstract and theoretical liberalism. “I left the highway – I left the street,” he wrote in “The Search for the Gael” and he found his people among the exploited poor, “thy disciplined host, despair.”

I have found my race – I have found my race,
But oh! so fallen and low,
That their very sires, if they looked in their face,
Their own sons would not know.
Still I've found my race – I've found my race,
And to me this race is dear,
And I pray that Heaven may grant me grace
To toil for them many a year.³²

After 1848 the position of the ancient race is as bad as it has ever been. Ireland, the mother of soldiers, has become the mother of exiles.³³ The Irish are a fallen race, a wrecked and ruined race. But McGee is prepared to identify himself with them and work for them.

Not of the mighty! not of the world's friends
Have I aspired to speak within these leaves;
These best befit their joyful kindred pens
My path lies where a broken people grieves;³⁴

His sympathy for the immigrants was constant. He always regarded emigration as a harsh necessity. Even when he was minister in charge of immigration in Canada, statistics and policies never blinded him to the human persons involved. He knew. He had been through it. In one of his very best poems this understanding passes from the particular to the universal; from the Irish and the immigrants to the rejected of humanity.

Tis most true, madam! the poor wretch you turned
Forth from your door was not of aspect fair;
His back was crooked, his eye, boa-like, burned,
Wild and inhuman hung his matted hair;
His wit's unmannerly, uncouth his speech,
Awkward his gait; but, madam, pray recall
His lot in life – -that may account for all.
His bed hath been the inhospitable stones,
His canopy the weeping mists of night;
Such savage shifts have warped his mind and bones,
And sent him all unseemly to your sight.
Want is no courtier – Woe neglects all grace;

³¹ *I will go to the Altar of God*, p. 571.

³² *The Search for the Gael*, p. 91.

³³ *Home Sonnets – Address to Ireland*, p. 125.

³⁴ *Sonnet – Not of the Mighty*, p. 130.

He hungered, and he had it in his face!³⁵

Almost nine years had passed since the upheaval of 1848, when McGee at the age of thirty-two moved to Canada. McGee's life falls naturally into three parts, his youth up to 1848, the nine years he spent in the United States and the eleven years he spent in Canada. But his poetry does not reflect these divisions. The biographer is well advised not to force it into the chronological pattern. McGee's eleven years in Canada are the period of his greatest achievement. But although he became a father of Confederation and its orator he did not become the poet of Confederation.

Out of more than three hundred poems in the collection less than two dozen deal with Canada. They tell us little about what McGee thought of Canada or his motives for coming here. The most successful are historical poems about the early explorers. "In the seaport of Saint Malo, twas a smiling morn, in May / When the Commodore Jacques Cartier to the westward sailed away";³⁶ was familiar to several generations of school children because it found its way into the school readers. "The Launch of the Griffin," an even better poem celebrating La Salle has not been so fortunate. It ends:

Thy Griffin bear thee, brave La Salle –
True Wizard of the Wild! whose art,
An eye of power, a knightly heart,
A patient purpose silence-nursed,
A high, enduring, saintly trust
Are mighty spells –we honor these,
Columbus of the inland seas!³⁷

In one poem Freedom ventures south but "heard the Negro's helpless prayer, / And felt her home could not be there."³⁸ In another Canadians can boast "We have never bought or sold / Afric's sons with Mexic's gold"³⁹ hinting at one reason why he had left the pre-Civil War United States. One of the best describes the approach by ship, a familiar experience to McGee, this time to Newfoundland.

The face that had gone down in tears
Ten days since in the English Channel,
Now, like Aurora, reappears –
Aurora wrapped in furs and flannel.
No female savant's field-day there,
Collecting butterflies and fern.
An iron land it seems from far,
On which no shepherd's flock reposes;
Lashed by the elemental war
The land is not a land of roses.⁴⁰

But from the biographer's point of view these poems develop no general theme, unlike the

³⁵ *A Plea for the Poor*, p. 492.

³⁶ *Jacques Cartier*, p. 387.

³⁷ *The Launch of the Griffin*, p. 404.

³⁸ *Freedom's Journey*, p. 160.

³⁹ *Along the Line*, p. 161.

⁴⁰ *Prima Vista*, p. 533.

exile poems where the poor contribute to the good as tryouts for the ideas which occur over and over. McGee himself had something to say about this dearth of inspiration.

A happy bird that hung on high
In the parlor of the hostelry,
Where daily resorted ladies fair
To breathe the garden-perfumed air,
And hear the sweet musician;
Removed to the public room at last,
His spirit seemed quite overcast,
He lost his powers of tune and time,
As I lost mine of rhythm and rhyme,
When I turned politician.⁴¹

The biographer might wish to further pursue the question why D'Arcy McGee lost his powers of rhythm and rhyme, but actually this is not what happened. McGee continued to write poetry as freely as ever, but he did not write on Canadian themes. The poetry has no reference to his public life in Canada.

In the years 1861-1862 occurred the deaths of two Irish antiquaries, John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry. In his poems commemorating these two scholars McGee seems to write also of himself. In 1846, when he was a young man reporting the sessions of parliament in London, he frequented the Reading Room of the British Museum and became acquainted with O'Donovan's researches in early Irish history. The work of both these men influenced his writing profoundly. In composing his tributes he is recalling his own youth and recording his own ambitions. The young McGee reading in the British Museum is described as well as O'Donovan in:

Happy the life our scholar led
Among the living and the dead –
Loving – beloved –
Mid precious tomes, and gentle looks,
The best of men and best of books,
He daily moved.⁴²

When he reminds O'Curry of:

That which made thy youthful vision,
That which made thy manhood's goal
Over coldness, toil, derision,
Bore thee, heart and fancy whole;
That which was thy first ambition⁴³

he could not help but think of his own youthful ambitions which, because he had to leave Ireland, could never in their original form be realized. "Happy age! protected, garnished, / With a patriot-scholar's fame!" he says of O'Curry, knowing that it will never be said of him in the same sense.

It is interesting before an audience like this to recall that McGee among the variety of his interests and talents was a historian. All his writing both prose and poetry shows a strong sense

⁴¹ *Impromptu*, p. 523.

⁴² *The Dead Antiquary, O'Donovan*, p. 448.

⁴³ *Sursum Corda*, p. 455.

of history and much of it is on historical subjects. In the poems to the antiquaries, especially the one to O'Donovan, there are penetrating verses on the writing of history. He understood the importance of going to the sources "undecked by fancies false."

Beneath his hand we saw restored
The tributes of the royal hoard,
The dues appraised
On every prince, and how repaid;
The order kept, the boundaries made,
The rites obeyed.⁴⁴

He understood the accuracy that results from this method and the courage needed to employ it.

Not even our loved Apostle's name
Could stand on ground of fabled fame
Beyond appeal;
But never sceptic more sincere
Labored to dissipate the fear
That good men feel;

The pious but unfounded fear
That reason, in her high career,
Too much might dare;
Some sacred legend, some renown
Should overturn or trample down
Beyond repair.⁴⁵

He could appreciate the priceless service O'Donovan and O'Curry had rendered scholarship in making these sources available. The one with gentle hand had rectified "the errors of old bardic pride, / And set aright / The story of our devious past, / And left it, as it now must last, / Full in the light!" The other drew "Old Egyptian seeds of story / From the grave to bloom anew!"⁴⁶

It was a function of the bard not only to recall the past but to make it live in the imagination of his audience. In this respect McGee identifies both O'Donovan and O'Curry with the bardic tradition. Certainly the glowing enthusiasm and vivid sense of the past which he attributed to the writers of these sober studies reflected his own feelings.

Kings that were dead two thousand years,
Cross-bearing chiefs and pagan seers,
He knew them all;
And bards, whose very harps are dust,
And saints, whose souls are with the just,
Came at his call.⁴⁷

A series of strained figures of speech conclude with a ringing assertion.

⁴⁴ *O'Donovan.*

⁴⁵ *O'Donovan.*

⁴⁶ *Sursum Corda.*

⁴⁷ *O'Donovan.*

No more the widowed glen repines,
No more the ruined cloister groans,
Back on the tides have come the shrines,
Lo! we have heard the speech of stones;⁴⁸

The biographer has to be on his guard against the temptation to sort out the good poetry from the bad and take a flyer at literary criticism. He is concerned with persistent themes in his subject's poetry rather than poems of individual excellence, although, it may be noted, persistent themes usually at some point produce first rate poetry.

Death is a dominant theme in McGee's poetry, especially the personal poems of friendship, love and religion. Poems in honour of deceased friends are typical of the last years of his life – the Canadian period. But the friend did not have to be dead for death to intrude into the poem. "Old friend! the years wear on, and many cares / And many sorrows both of us have known," he writes to Gavin Duffy. "Time for us both a quiet couch prepares – / A couch like Jacob's, pillowed with a stone."⁴⁹

"Trappings and harness made for passing show, / Are little worth," he admonished his friend Mrs. Sadlier. "When halts the hearse, where all things human go, / With earth – to earth!"⁵⁰

Even Mary, his wife, who survived him, has such startling lines as these written of her:

My Mary, Heaven had called you then,
Its light was round you shed;
Oh! that my stubborn heart should live
That dreadful moment through,
When those bleak robes I raised, to give
One parting kiss to you;
When there lay all my earthly joy,
Arrayed for death's cold bed;
I am lonely, very lonely
Oh! would that I were dead.⁵¹

Of course this is written at the very nadir of his depression after coming to America. But even the more reasonably expressed and charming:

I left two loves on a distant strand,
One young, and fons and fair, and bland;
One fair, and old, and sadly grand –
My wedded wife and my native land.

has this verse:

The mother and wife shall pass away,
Her hands be dust, her lips be clay;
But my other love on earth shall stay,
And live in the life of a better day.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Eugene O'Curry*, p. 457.

⁴⁹ *To a Friend in Australia*, p. 444.

⁵⁰ *Wishes*, p. 460.

⁵¹ *The Exile*, p. 42.

⁵² *Memories*, p. 427.

His treatment of death has as many facets as his complex personality. It can be familiar or sublime, formal, romantic, as fey as Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* or just gothically gruesome. He greets death in many moods, bitterly, joyously, serenely, sometimes even cosily.

Did McGee have a premonition of his own death? Because of its violent and dramatic character this question is apt to arise. Certainly he knew of the threats made against him when he came out strongly against the Fenians. But there is no evidence in the poems of premonition, although the reader, using hindsight, will be struck with many a line and phrase that seems to underline his fate.

"Death strikes the gifted, then / Come the worms – inquests – and the award of men!"⁵³

Silent for aye that tongue
On which delighted hung
Myriads of hearers!

Rest for the teeming brain,
Rest besought not in vain,
When into God's domain
Opened life's portal!⁵⁴

If there was something dark and morbid in his nature, as these death poems suggest, he was saved from it by his wholesome Catholicism. Wherever his poems are religious in tone, death brightens into eternity. He is strongly attracted to the doctrine of the communion of saints and the value of intercessory prayer. He says of Eugene O'Curry that because he had revived the memory of early Irish saints he will have them as his suppliants. "Let us pray for the dead," begins another poem. And having prayed for the beloved dead, the unknown dead, the valiant dead and so on he turns the tables in the last verse.

By the gate called Desire
In clouds they're ascended; –
Oh, saints! pray for us,
Now your sorrows are ended!⁵⁵

One of his last poems extolls prayer for the dead.

Mighty our Holy Church's will
To shield her parting souls from ill;
Jealous of Death she guards them still

The dearest friend will turn away,
And leave the clay to keep the clay;
Ever and ever she will stay –
Miserere, Domine!⁵⁶

But the communion of saints exists in this world as well as in the next; the mystical body is for the here and now as well as for eternity. D'Arcy McGee, who in his active life has been called a great Catholic layman, in one long didactic poem wrestles with the problem of life, a mystery to man. He begins by arguing with himself. Is life only "a rope of slippery strands,"

⁵³ *Monody on the Death of Gerald Griffin*, p. 436.

⁵⁴ *Edward Whelan*, p. 465.

⁵⁵ *A Prayer for the Dead*, p. 565.

⁵⁶ *Requiem Aeternam*, p. 467.

A taper made but to be burned out,
A better sort of shroud, a thistle-down,
The airy carriage of an unsown seed,
The wooden shedding of a lasting structure,
A very flimsy, miserable makeshift,⁵⁷

He makes the assertion, life is a mystery, could be an art; and then goes on to state that the young man is told “Life’s but a voyage, a river, and a dream.” (Symbols, incidentally that McGee uses frequently in his death poems.)

And this he takes as literal, nor thinks
The voyager’s port is death; the river’s end
Is in the sea eternity; the dream once over,
The sleeper wakes up face to face with God!

This is a well expressed philosophy of eternity, but McGee has not yet lowered his sights to find a philosophy of life. He does so presently with the flat statement. “The first great end of life, is to be saved; / And next, to leave the world the better for us. / Both are commanded, both are possible.”

He launches into a train of thought about the faculties of the soul formed and developed by its life on earth.

But man’s true empire is his deathless soul –
How capable of culture and adornment!
His memory, which, from the distant years,
Drives its long camel-cavalcades of lore;
His will, a curbed steed or a cataract,
Full of directness, loftiness and power,
If it were rightly schooled; his reason,
An armory of Archimedean levers,
Such as, reposing on the Word of God,
Might raise the world!

McGee’s argument here follows that if man made effective the laws of God in his own life he might accomplish the kingdom of God on earth.

Then Faith, and Truth, and patient Charity,
Returning from their long sojourn in heaven.
With all their glorious arts and gentle kin,
Would colonize this moral wilderness,
Making it something like what God designed!

A final word about the personal poetry as it concerns his wife Mary McGee. Very little can be discovered about her; no correspondence between them has survived. The biographer, who must try to discover the whole man and not just the public man, reads the love poems very carefully. A certain number tell of dying or bewitched lovers. Almost all the rest are addressed to Mary. Of these almost all are obviously written during the separation that occurred in the first year of their marriage when McGee had to flee to America and Mary could not join him till after the birth of their child. The poems are full of longing and yearning, recalling their brief happiness. “Seas and storms may be between us –” he tells Mary, “Anger and neglect are not

⁵⁷ *Life, a Mystery to Man*, p. 553.

– / Time, too, rolls his tide between us, / Vainly to the unforgot.”⁵⁸ One of the least mournful hails Mary as his support and comfort.

Blow as ye will, ye winds of fate,
And let life’s trials blackly lower;
I know the garden and the gate,
Ye cannot strip my roseate bower.
That safe retreat I still can keep,
Despite of envy’s venom’d dart;
Despite of all life’s storms, can sleep
Securely lodged in Mary’s heart.⁵⁹

One, oddly spontaneous, begins as a historical, half-fanciful poem about Sebastian Cabot and turns into a love poem. Sebastian Cabot, on a voyage, is writing to his lady wife. He asks the sun, the wind and the moon for news of her. Then in a dream he returns home. At this point without explanation “my lady” becomes “darling Mary” and Cabot turns into D’Arcy McGee.

And I beheld you, darling, by our hearth.
Gone was your girlish bloom and maiden mirth,
And Care’s too early print was on the brow,
Where I have seen the sunshine shamed ere now;
And as unto your widowed bed you passed,
I saw no more-tears blinded me at last.

But mourn not, Mary, let no dismal dream
Darken the current of Hope’s flowing stream;
Trust Him who sets his stars on high to guide
Us sinful sailors through the pathless tide,
The God who gave even me a perfect wife,
The star, the lamp, the compass of my life,
Who will replace me on a tranquil shore,
To live with Love and you forever more.⁶⁰

The love poems tell us a great deal about McGee’s feelings, little or nothing about the course of the marriage, very little about Mary, except that she was someone he turned to confidently for sympathy and support. That alone is significant and a key to much that is unrecorded.

There are other aspects of his life and character about which the poems tell us little. Of his quick and often biting wit that was both the delight and terror of his associates there is only an occasional flash in his poetry. As has been pointed out, the great enterprise of his Canadian career, the confederation of the British North American Provinces, receives not a line.

Had he lived would there have been more distinctly Canadian poetry? Possibly. Poetry comes after the experience. The normal process of literary creation needs a period of gestation. D’Arcy McGee was assassinated within a year of the passing of the British North American Act. We know that he planned further literary work. Although he was hesitating as to the form, we know too that he had chosen the subject. It was the immigrants.

⁵⁸ *To Mary in Ireland*, p. 417.

⁵⁹ *Mary’s Heart*, p. 440.

⁶⁰ *Sebastian Cabot to His Lady*, p. 385.

It would be an obtuse person who would deny that this is a Canadian theme. The immigrant is a typical and recurring figure in this country, as he is everywhere in the New World. Few have written of the immigrant with more subtle understanding than D'Arcy McGee. He was aware that the immigrant faces not a single experience but a sequence of experiences; that more often than not, there ensued not a complete break with the past but a state of tension between the old life and the new and that this tension could lead either to disaster or achievement. He himself was the exemplary immigrant not only in his life work but in his death which was a result of his insistence on loyalty to the new land.

Such conclusions as are to be drawn from McGee's poetry have already been made during this discourse. Certain trends have been noted; McGee's sense of history and his pre-occupation with phenomena of exile and emigration. These themes are also treated in his speeches and prose writing. They belong in the realm of public affairs and are matters for the historian. But in the poetry will be found expression of moods, evidence of temperament and taste, levels of consciousness and nuances of thought that have no other record. These belong to his private life and are matters for the biographer. The biographer of D'Arcy McGee dare not neglect his poetry.