

Bernard O'Dowd

Born 11th April, 1866.

Died 1st September, 1953.

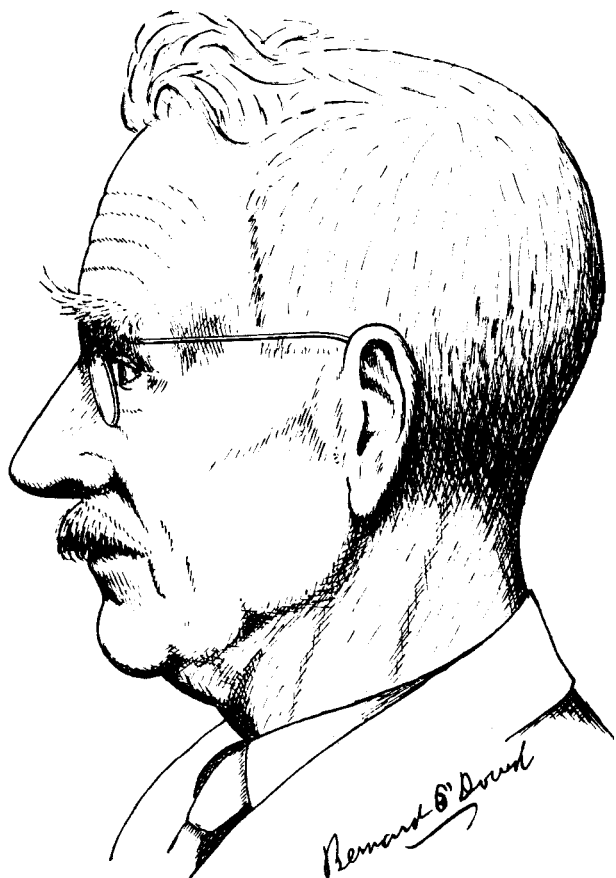
Centenary Souvenir

That reddish veil which o'er the face
Of night-hag East has drawn . . .
Flames new disaster for the race?
Or can it be the Dawn?

—"Dawnward?"



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Bernard O'Donnell

*Sketched from life
by Harry H. Rance. 13/7/49.*

THE POET

They tell you the poet is useless and empty the sound of his lyre,
That science has made him a phantom, and thinned to a shadow his fire;
Yet reformer has never demolished a dungeon or den of the foe
But the flame of the soul of a poet pulsed in every blow.

They tell you he hinders with tinklings, with gags from an obsolete stage,
The dramas of deed and the worship of Laws in a practical age;
But the deeds of today are the children of magical dreams he has sung,
And the Laws are ineffable fires that from niggardly heaven he wrung!

The bosoms of women he sang of are heaving today in our maids;
The God that he drew from the silence our woes or our weariness aids.
Not a maxim has needled through Time, but a poet had feathered its shaft,
Not a Law is a boon to the people, but he has dictated its draft.

And why do we fight for our fellows? For Liberty why do we long?
Because with the core of our nerve-cells are woven the lightnings of song!
For the poet for ages illumined the animal dreams of our sires.
And his Thought-Become-Flesh is the matrix of all our unselfish desires!

Yea, why do we fain for the Beautiful? Why do we die for the Right?
Because through the forested aeons, in spite of the priests of the Night,
Undeterred by the faggot or cross, uncorrupted by glory or gold,
To our mothers the poet his Vision of Goodness and Beauty has told.

When, comrades, we thrill to the message of speaker in highway or hall,
The voice of the poet is reaching the silenter poet in all;
And again, as of old, when the flames are to leap up the turrets of Wrong,
Shall the torch of the New Revolution be lit from the words of a Song.

—BERNARD O'DOWD

BERNARD O'DOWD

O'Dowd, like Lawson, Whitman, and Shelley, was a poet of revolt. He was an intellectual, but must not be confused with the so many pseudo-intellectuals among poets of today.

He had something vital and crusading to say, and said it in a mould of classical learning, symbols and images, that unfortunately were beyond the "man in the street." He compacted so much into his verse that the ordinary person was frustrated and bewildered. But the grandeur of his thought and message remains . . . awaiting!

Intellectually he was swayed between the Right and the Left on religion, but finally rested in the halfway house of the relatively free atmosphere of Unitarianism. Politically, he remained a consistent rebel, a democrat and humanitarian. Throughout all his moods and mental wanderings he was consistently a Freethinker in the sense of not surrendering his reason and intellectual integrity to any creed or arbitrary authority. His restless urge to think, search, ask questions, and reason, led him at times into mystical bogs from which he never fully extricated himself. He seemed torn between the Irish mysticism of his upbringing and his natural questioning and reasoning mind. Yet he was consistently opposed to all forms of tyranny and exploitation of either the body or the mind.

The poetic quality of his verse has been too severely criticised; even unjustly so. Lawson, Whitman and Shelley also suffered the same fate. An example: One Literary Fund lecturer I heard said: "O'Dowd's poetry suffered because he wrote for the demagogic press." That word "demagogic" carries a clear implication of prejudice, and can only refer to such papers as "The Bulletin," "Tocsin," and "Socialist" of O'Dowd's day. O'Dowd I think would have taken this reference as a compliment. A rebel against injustice, an advocate for human freedom, a debunker of shams and hypocrisy, a voice asking questions, a prophet calling to a better world, he clothed these things in firm, assertive language without word-spinning frills. And yet he could compose delicate, lyrical gems and powerful sonnets. All in all he might have presented his ideas in too compressed and learned a form for his popularity. But he did not

seek cheap popularity at the expense of what he wanted to say.

Like Lawson, in later life he became somewhat disillusioned over not having his ideas accepted, and wrote relatively little poetry. "Australia does not want me," he said. I asked him once for some information about his earlier "rebel" days. Giving his familiar whimsical chuckle, he said: "Who wants to know about that now?" and changed the subject. On another occasion at his home he introduced me to another person and made passing reference to those "rebel" days. "But, Mr. O'Dowd," the other replied, "aren't you still a rebel?" Again that chuckle, and then, "O yes! Only more so!" Still on another occasion after talking politics, he came to the door with me when I was leaving, and quite spontaneously said: "I am a Communal Anarchist." A few weeks later he was dead. Vondel, his son, confirmed his father's statement, when I told him of it.

To hear O'Dowd recite his own verse (particularly "Bacchus," which he told me was to extol the "joy of living") was something never to be forgotten. His verse seemed to possess him, or he the poem, in a kind of emotional identification. Slightly swaying his body and rhythmically tapping his foot, he brought out of the poem a meaning and significance that otherwise did not seem to be there.

His rather high-pitched voice and clear enunciation had a slight Irish accent. He had clear-cut, sharp features, with twinkling eyes. Over average height, he had a slim, erect carriage. His hair and moustache were snow-white when I knew him, but were red in earlier life. He had a very friendly, if reserved, manner and, in conversation, never intruded his tremendous learning.

There are too few Bernard O'Dowds in the world, and it is fitting that we should honour his memory of his centenary.

HARRY H. PEARCE

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