

The Heroic Muse

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Breathes There the Man: Heroic Ballads & Poems of the English-Speaking Peoples, edited by Frank S. Meyer, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1973. 281 pp. \$10.00.

IN THE DARK early days of the First World War a member of the British Parliament proposed that the Chaucerian perquisite of an annual butt of Canary wine—or about 140 gallons of it—be restored to the incumbent laureate, Mr. Bridges, in the hope it might inspire him to something that would rally the martial spirit of his countrymen and encourage their hard-pressed allies. Though the proposal was not adopted, Mr. Bridges did try his hand at a few war poems, but the task was ill-suited to his subtle and austere genius, so he gave it up, apparently, and returned to polishing alexandrines for *The Testament of Beauty*.

Still, the official labors of even the most dutiful and obliging of laureates, say a Tennyson or a Masfield, have been seldom an artistic success, as may be seen from the specimens contained in D. B. Wyndham Lewis' anthology of bad verse, called *The Stuffed Owl*. Perhaps this new and needed anthology, assembled by the late Frank Meyer with the help of his friend Jared Lobdell, may help to explain the failures. Mr. Meyer in his foreword felt constrained to acknowledge that not "all that is included in this book is authentic poetry." This reservation applies mainly to the sort of verses that were written in close temporal proximity to the events that provoked them. Such productions, since the authors were

caught up in the passions of their times, were prone to bellicosity or bombast, or to both; Albert Pike's "battle" version of "Dixie," substituted in 1861 for the rollicking words of Dan Emmett, and Randall's "My Maryland" might serve as examples. What appears to be most needed for heroic poetry is historical distance, enabling the poet to recreate an incident or an event, about which not a great deal is known, in terms of his own imagination and genius. Most of the more rousing poems to be found in this book were written years, centuries, or even millenia after the incidents that inspired them—the St. Crispian's Eve speech that Shakespeare, nearly two centuries after Agincourt, put into the mouth of Henry V; the eighteenth-century Jane Elliott's dirge for the flowers of sixteenth-century Scotland that perished on Flodden Field; the twentieth-century Chesterton's exultation in drumbeat rhythm over the great naval victory at Lepanto (A.D. 1571); the nineteenth-century Macaulay's celebration of the Bourbon and Huguenot triumph at Ivry (A.D. 1590), and his great leap backward to the Horatian heroics at the *pons sublicius* (c. 508 B.C.), surpassed by Lord Byron's even longer retreat to the biblical story (2 Kings 19:35) of the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the hosts of Sennacherib (c. 689 B.C.).

Yet this rule of historical distance, even if valid, must admit exceptions. Mrs. Howe's famous "Battle Hymn," calling doom and destruction on the contemners of the Lord, though written in the midst of a bitter and bloody civil war, is somehow

lifted to the realm of "authentic poetry" by its scriptural overtones and fierce Calvinistic fervor. The poet most generously represented in these pages is Rudyard Kipling. He is credited here with a Mithraic anthem, purported to have been sung by Roman soldiers of the XXX Legion at about the time of the Emperor Constantine; but except for the transposition of epochs and deities it has a curious similarity to the "Hymn Before Action," somehow overlooked by Frank Meyer. The other Kipling poems here, however, reflect the politics, loyalties and forebodings of the poet's own age. He has been called the prophet of imperialism, and certainly he spoke for those who created and preserved the British Empire, especially the soldiers. He saw the British imperialists not as embodiments of capitalist cupidity but as missionaries of order, civilization, peace and progress, whose labors, alas, were too often set at naught by the "sloth and heathen folly" of the intended beneficiaries. Kipling's enemies, literary and political, were of course legion. His poem, "The English Flag"—one of the dozen reproduced by Frank Meyer—was savagely parodied by the liberal politician and wit, Henry Labouchère, and he was the victim of some of Max Beerbohm's malevolent caricatures. He was considered in his day a chauvinist and jingo and today no doubt would be deemed a "racist"; for many phrases from his poetry—"the white man's burden"—"the lesser breeds without the law"—have given wide offense. Notwithstanding all this, he was in the earlier years of this century the most widely read, admired, and quoted of all contemporary English poets, and among the many reasons for this were the biblical virility and simplicity of his idiom and his masterly use of ballad forms and metres. Sir Walter Scott was another who drew on balladry and ballad lore for his own excursions into historical distance, from one of which, "The Lay of the Last Minstrel," Frank Meyer has borrowed the title of his book. Meyer, indeed, considered all the poems in his book to be ballads, "in spirit,

if not always technically," since they are "affirmations of the human spirit."

This collection is probably the only one of its kind now in print, though much of its content is to be found in other and better known anthologies, including Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Many of the American poems and patriotic ditties were made familiar to an elder and more innocent generation through the old-fashioned school readers. No doubt there are even a few still living who can remember how in the long vanished manuals of rhetoric and prosody lines now in this book were cited to illustrate the metrical patterns of English versification; for example the Byronic anapests:

The As-syr- / ian came down / like a
wolf / on the fold
 And his co- / horts were gleam- / ing in
pur- / ple and gold . . . ;

or G. H. McMaster's trochaics and catalexis:

In their / rag-ged / reg-i / men-tals
Stood the / old Con-ti- / nen- / tals
Yield- / ing / not . . . ;

or the Tennysonian dactylic dimeters:

Half a league, / half a league,
Half a league / on- / ward . . .

One readily understands why such hackneyed but well loved pieces as "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Hail Columbia," "America," "America the Beautiful," and so on, had to be, for all their familiarity, included in this collection; but one is a bit distressed to find also "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," not so much because it is a rather trite gallop of verse, as because it seems to have been something close to a plagiarism of an earlier British song.¹ The absurdity of such a metaphor applied to our vast continental expanse has often remarked, but it could be and has been applied with perfect congruity to one and an-

other of the British Isles, most notably in that beautiful burst of lyrical patriotism that Shakespeare attributes to the dying John of Gaunt:

This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house²

One is happy to report that Frank Meyer chose to reproduce twenty-nine pentameter lines from this famous and heroic harangue.

¹"Britannia, the Pride of the Ocean," by Stephen Joseph Meany, 1842.

²Richard II, Act II, Scene 1.