

John Greenleaf Whittier and His
Relation to the Abolition of Slavery.

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Among our American poets stands one whose fame is not derived merely from the literary quality of his work. For many years political and humanitarian interests caused his poetical abilities to become merely a means to an end. Not until the prime of life was past did he find himself free to write as a poet and not as an advocate. The best years of his manhood were given to the work of furthering a just but unpopular cause - a cause wherein he was often misunderstood and unappreciated.

John Greenleaf Whittier was born December 17, 1807, at the old homestead, near Haverhill, Massachusetts. His parents, John Whittier and Abigail (Hussey) Whittier, were strict Quakers of the old New England type. The father was a stern, upright, just man, noted for his high ideals and rigid integrity. But he had little sympathy with his son's poetical ambitions and desire for an education. His mother was a sweet, benevolent lady of commanding appearance and deep religious faith. From her Whittier inherited his imaginative faculty and poetic fancies. Two sisters, a brother and

and uncle and aunt completed the family group which is described so graphically in *Snow Bound*:—

Our uncle, innocent of books,
Was rich in lore of fields and brooks,
The ancient teachers never dumb
Of Nature's unhoused lyceum."

* * * *

"A simple, guileless, childlike man,
Content to live where life began."

Among the rugged hills of New England the life of a farmer boy was peaceful and wholesome, notwithstanding its privations and hardships. The knowledge obtained in the log school houses was necessarily limited since the terms were short, the teachers incompetent, and books scarce. The library of the Whittier family consisted of about twenty volumes of biography, history and reports of Quaker proceedings, until Joshua Coffin, teacher and student, added a copy of Burns's Poems. John was overjoyed to secure this little volume and read it enthusiastically. The simple rustic verses of the Scottish Bard appealed to this country youth as could nothing else, and inspired him to attempt some

verses of his own, following the style of Burns more or less closely.

His sister encouraged him in his literary attempts, and finally, unknown to him, sent one of his best to William Lloyd Garrison, then an enterprising young editor. This poem was written, June 1, 1825 - and was entitled, "The Exile's Departure." June 8, 1826, it was published in the Newburyport, "Free Press." John was pleased to read his verses in print and sent another poem himself - a bit of blank verse called, "The Duty."

Surprised and charmed with the effusions of the youthful poet, Garrison and Abijah W. Thayer, editor of the Haverhill "Gazette," persuaded Mr. Whittier to allow his son to attend the Haverhill Academy. The youth was expected to pay his own expenses while at school, and to do this he kept books, taught school and worked at the shoemaking trade. For two terms he enjoyed the social and educational privileges of Haverhill, reading, studying and writing. Prose and poetry from his pen appeared frequently in the "Gazette." In his work at this period he evidently followed

other writers rather closely - Burns, Moore, Willis, Bryant, Byron, and Mrs. Hemans, were his favorites. In many ways he reminds one of Burns. Like the Scotch singer he was a country lad with a very limited education; his heart was with the common people and he wrote for them, and it was by them that his writings were best appreciated.

Upon leaving the Academy where he had obtained his meager education, Whittier became editor of the "American Manufacturer," a Boston paper. The salary was small, but his work was light - his duties consisting mainly of writing the editorials. In these editorials various topics were touched upon. Several were criticisms of the authors and literary productions of the time. He also wrote a series of editorial addresses to the young mechanics of New England. In addition there appeared at various times, poems of both a political and a non-political character.

During the next two or three years many articles of various descriptions - literary criticisms, poems, historical sketches, essays and political satires appeared rapidly. The majority of these articles were excellent and

showed the mental growth of the man as well as the extent of his study.

New England at that time was at the receptive stage, pleased and even eager to accept the effusions of a young poet, whose style was new and effective and whose subject-matter and mode of treatment were original.

While at home on the farm Whittier began to turn his attention to politics instead of poetry. The plans he laid did not develop, but it was about this time (1833) that he allied himself with the unpopular abolitionist movement. It seemed that, when Whittier cast aside his literary hopes and political ambitions to ally himself with a band of reformers, whose cause was as unpopular as it was apparently impossible, he was abandoning all that would make him famous and was entering upon a career that could bring only trouble and obscurity. But the doctrines of his religion, as well as the humanitarian elements of his nature induced him to devote his life to breaking the chains and securing the freedom of the negro. When he had once decided to cast his lot with the

Abolitionists, his whole soul was given to the work

Whittier showed his Yankee parentage in his shrewdness and ability to plan and conduct political campaigns, so as to further the cause. He guarded every point by which the opposition might gain a foothold. Soon after taking up the cause which his conscience bade him promulgate, he published a pamphlet entitled, "Justice and Expediency: or, Slavery considered with a view to its Rightful and Effectual Remedy, Abolition." This pamphlet attracted much attention and was widely circulated. One of the Southern papers printed extracts of it with severe comments upon the spirit of the production, whereupon Whittier replied with, "The Abolitionists: Their Sentiments and Objects," which was published in the Haverhill Gazette.

December 1833, Mr. Whittier was one of the delegates from Massachusetts to assist in organizing the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. For the sum of one hundred and fifty dollars, he devoted all of his time and energies, for six months to the cause of the Anti-Slavery Society. This small sum

barely paid his expenses and in no way remunerated him for the dangers he underwent from mob-violence and personal spite, or for the injury to his never robust health.

In 1835, he was elected to the Massachusetts legislature and was re-elected in 1836. In this same year he again undertook the editorship of the Haverhill "Gazette"; and also assisted in editing the "Emancipator" and the "Anti-Slavery Reporter." Two years later he took charge of the "Pennsylvania Freeman," in Philadelphia. While there he had more experience with mob rule.

In 1836, the old homestead had been disposed of and he had settled himself in a cottage in the little village of Amesbury, near the sea. In this secluded place he continued his work in his own quiet way. His poems though excellent were written merely for the cause that lay next his heart and therefore lacked much of the literary interest that they might otherwise have contained.

Whittiers work for the cause of abolition was as varied as it was efficient. He was a valued member of the American Anti-

Slavery Society of which he was, at different times, agent, manager and secretary. He was also vice-president of the Massachusetts Anti Slavery Society. In addition to the duties devolving upon him from these offices, he directed the political action of the Societies and thus enabled them to advance the reform that those who merely preached were unable to forward. Aside from this service, his experience and ability as a journalist and pamphleteer were invaluable to the cause. His political poems as they appeared were published in the various antislavery papers of the vicinity and thence were copied far and wide. In 1837, and again in 1838, some of these poems were collected and published. Both volumes, in the form of tracts, were widely distributed by the Abolitionists.

Few of these poems were of lasting importance. They were written for a cause - any topic then before the public was taken as a theme for a poem. The death of a noble man, a newspaper article, an action of Congress or of the Courts - anything for or against the cause, was taken and immediately embodied in verse, that rang clear as a bugle call through the land. His reflective

mind was quick to grasp the real issue, to realize that but one reform could be established at once. His practiced hand unerringly hit the mark. He satirized, fled and expostulated, until after thirty years he had the satisfaction of seeing the slaves set free and given the rights of citizenship.

We of the present generation think of him as Whittier, the poet, but those of his time thought more of his work as a reformer and abolitionist. His New England bringing-up, his Quaker parentage, and his environment tended to make him practical and far-seeing. He appreciated the fact that but one thing could be done at a time and that other reforms must wait. He realized too that abolition could be accomplished only by political means. With this knowledge he went about the work in a shrewd, calculating manner that eventually brought success. His poems and prose were battle calls and battle cries that encouraged the disheartened and called others to the field.

In "The New Year," written in 1837, Whittier lays the lash upon the backs of the Northern politicians, who were indifferent to, or in favor of slavery.

Yet, shame upon them! there they sit,
Men of the North, subdued and still;
Mute, pliant poltroons, only fit
To work a master's will."

Sold, - bargained off for Southern votes,
A passive herd of mules
Just braying through their purchased throats
Whatever their owner rules."

When Texas was about to be admitted into the Union, Whittier used every means to prevent the act; since he thought that its admission would only be a means of promoting Slavery. "Texas" is a result of his thoughts upon this subject.

"Make our Union-band a chain!
We will snap its links in twain
We will stand erect again."

In, "Massachusetts to Virginia," he typifies the sectional feeling then prevalent among those of the North and South.

"All that a sister state should do, all that a
free state may,
Heart, hand and purse we proffer, as in
our early days;
But that one dark, loathesome burden ye
must stagger with alone,

And reap the bitter harvest which ye
yourselves have sown."

The clergymen and church people who
upheld slavery and considered it a gift
of God, are severely criticized in,
"Clirical Oppressors."

Feed fat, ye locusts, feed!
And in your tasselled pulpits, thank the
Lord
That from the toiling bondman's utter
need,
ye pile your own full board."

A poem, pathetic and beautiful in its
sad portrayal of the existing evil, is "The
Christian Slave."

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

It was such poems as these written hurried-
ly but earnestly and thoughtfully; that

helped arouse men to take up arms for the negro slave; caused clergymen and statesmen to proclaim from pulpit and platform the wrong and injustice of human slavery.

As examples of poetic art these poems are doubtless excelled by those of other poets, but no others ever wrought a greater effect upon a nation. Although without the beauty of form and expression which some of his poems have, they are beautiful in their evidently strong and honest purpose and genuine feeling. Thus he contributed in no small measure to make this nation wholly free.