

Sidney Lanier as a Man of Genius!

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Genius:

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2. As a Poet.
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Sidney Lanier as a Man of Genius.

Critics in estimating the worth of authors are apt to overlook men who do not take part in some great movement of the day, as did Whittier our great Abolitionist poet. This has especially been true of our Southern poet Sidney Lanier. The fact of his having taken arms with the South during the Civil War may have had something to do with his not being recognized as one of the great poets during his life. But where there is true genius if will, sooner or later, be recognized for all it is worth. People are just commencing to realize Lanier's importance in the literary world.

The man and poet who wished "that life and song might each express the other's all" was born at Macon, Georgia, in a house yet standing on the brow of a hill composing a part of the inland town. A Huguenot refugee to England in Queen Elizabeth's time, Jerome Lanier was the earliest known ancestor, whose son, Nicolas, was in favor with

James I and Charles I as a musician, and a painter, and also in political service. The earliest American ancestor was Thomas Lanier, of Richmond Virginia, about 1716. Robert S. Lanier, a lawyer, still living in Macon, Georgia, was the father of the poet.

Sidney Lanier attended private school in Macon, and, at the age of fourteen, entered the Oglethorpe College. The president of the College was the scholarly Talmage, uncle of the now famous pulpit orator. Discontinuing at college, he spent a year as delivery clerk in Macon Post-office. Here he studied humorous phases of life, which, "led that exquisite appreciation of humor, which was to his philosophical bent quartz and gold."

As a child the poet exhibited a wonderful passion for music, using first the simplest instruments such as the negro minstrel's bones, the drum, and the plantation banjo. He was given a one-keyed German flute for a Christmas present, and acquired proficiency upon it in a short time.

He could perform slightly upon every instrument that then became accessible to his boyish ardor, such as the guitar, the piano, and the organ; but the flute had first won his affections and for many reason, it retained his undiminished love. He was well nigh perfect master of its wonderful effects! While in the army his flute and a small volume of German poems accompanied him every where in his haversack, even if hard tack and soldier's forage were displaced. These were second only to his gun and ammunition.

The violin was also a favorite instrument. It was this above all other instruments that commanded his soul. He has recorded how, after playing on the violin, he would be rapt into an ecstasy which left his whole frame trembling with the "exhaustion of too sense delight." In after years, more than one listener marked the strange violin effect which he produced from his flute. It was in his devotion to music that he discovered that he possessed decided genius!

His friends were rather alarmed at his devotion to music, and he for a while shared the early notion of his parents that it was an unworthy pursuit, so that he rather repressed his taste. He did not then know by what inheritance it had come to him, nor how worthy is the art. In his college note book, he has penciled his displeasure to this musical talent: "I am more than all perplexed by this fact, that the prime inclination, that is, natural bent, of my nature is to music; and for that I have the greatest talent, indeed not boasting, for God gave it me, I have an extraordinary musical talent, and feel it within me plainly that I could rise as high as any composer. But I cannot bring myself to believe that I was intended for a musician, because it seems so small a business in comparison with other things which it seems to me I might do."

At the outbreak of the Civil War, he volunteered as a private. He refused

promotion several times during the war, declining to be separated from his younger brother. He was assigned as signal officer to the blockade-runner, "Anne," and was taken prisoner of war. Several months of hardship at Oak Point Lookout, and the long weary tramp at the close of hostilities from Virginia to Georgia, developed the growth of the poisonous germ of consumption. Peace to him was the beginning of a battle with the relentless disease, a war of about fifteen years of varying fortune, but in which one combatant was always patient and ever heroic.

In December of 1867, he married Mary Day of Macon, Georgia. At this time Lardier was principal of an academy in Alabama. Hemorrhoid of the lungs came "to advance the red flag of warning," and he returned to Georgia and undertook to practice law. This did not suit him, so he gave it up, and after traveling over different parts of the south in search of health, he went to Baltimore under engagement as first flute for the Peabody Symphony Concert.

With his settlement in Baltimore began a story of as brave and sad a struggle as the history of genius records. On the one hand was the opportunity for study and the full consciousness of power and a will never subdued; and on the other a body wasting with consumption that must be forced to tasks beyond its strength to express the thoughts of beauty which strove for utterance.

It is impossible to read his poems without feeling the presence of a clear individuality in song, a nature free, daring, inaccessible to a great range of influences and melodies. Although the works of other poets may have passed through his mind, may have given something of coloring, we find no distinct trace of any save, possibly, Shakespeare's sonnets. In poetic aim, form, and choice of themes, Lanier has expressed himself so positively that he cannot be mistaken for any one else.

His poem "Corn" was the first new voice of song which the South has blown

to us over the ashes of battle. We find in it the atmosphere of the first tropical burst of our American summer. The whole poem throbs with sunshine, and is musical with the murmur of growing things. It is racy with the fullest life of the soil and the verse "puts forth fresh sprays like an over-ripe vine."

In the "Symphony" and "Psalm of the West" we find the same qualities, to which a fanciful element has been added. The rhymes are sometimes so frequent as to, figuratively speaking, tangle the reader in the melodious sounds, and make the repose of a single couplet graceful. To do this requires the firmest hand, the finest ear, and the most delicate sense of art.

He wrote "The Centennial Meditation of Columbia", 1776-1876. This was a cantata which was set to music by a man in Baltimore. This poem first brought his name into general notice; but its publication, in advance of the music, caused an immense amount of ridicule, more or less good humored. It was written by a

musician to go with music under the new relations of poetry to music brought about by the great modern development of the orchestra, and was not to be judged without its orchestral accompaniment. The criticism if received pained the author, but did not effect his faith in his theory of art.

His poems all deal with nature and the simple things we see around us every day, but to which we pay so little heed. He sings, at the sundown of his own life, the noble hymn "Sunrise." His heart, mind and spiritual nature grew tenderer and clearer as his physical strength waned.

Lanier did not agree with M. Gola in his belief that science will destroy all poetry, all novel writing, and all imaginative work, generally, by absorbing into itself all imaginative effort, so that every novel will be merely the plain unvarnished record of a scientific experiment in passion. He rather believed that science goes hand in hand with poetry and fiction; for he asks the question:

"What would be the worth of Shakespeare's genius, unless he were a scientific man to the extent of knowing the science of English verse? Or what would be George Eliot's genius, unless she knew the science of English prose, or the science of novel writing?"

"The English Novel." Lanier's most important prose work, consists of a series of lectures delivered at Johns Hopkins University. This lacks the intimate continuity which a subject like this requires; but when he wrote these he did not intend to put them into book form. His object was the fundamental idea that the development of the English novel marks the development of man's conception of his individuality. He often digresses from the main theme, for in the book of three hundred pages on the history of English fiction, at least one hundred pages are devoted to the discussion of the life and genius of a single writer. In this book he seems to have set before himself two conceptions to which

he bends all his powers, illustrations and arguments. One was the supreme passion for form in literary art; and the other, was the firm belief that English literature had reached its loftiest expression in the work of George Eliot. He firmly believed that poetry and music should go hand in hand, and that science will not do away with poetry.

This book, while containing much that is suggestive and original, goes wide from its aim, and must be taken, not for a study of the English novel and its development, but as a collection of opinions of a brilliant man of letters upon various topics more or less connected with the general title under which it is published.

Neither sickness nor drudgery could long turn him from the deepest craving of his spirit. Conscious of his power he had yet what is perhaps the rarest talent in man of his temperament—the talent of waiting. The mission of poets, as he conceived it, transcended all others. He knew that the innate

poetic faculty would not suffice for its fulfilment unless it was reinforced by character and knowledge. "Day by day" he wrote his wife, "from my snow and my sunshine, a thousand vital elements rill thru my soul. Day by day, the secret deep forces gather, which will pleasantly display themselves in bending leaf and waxy petals, and in useful fruit and grain." Again he writes, "All day my soul hath been cutting swiftly into the great space of the subtle, inspeakable deep, driven by wind after wind of heavenly melody. The very inner spirit and essence of all wind-song, bird-song, passion-song, folk-song, country-song, soul-song, and body-song hath blown upon me in quick gusts like the breath of passion, and sailed me into a sea of vast dreams, where each wave is at once a vision and a melody."

Conscious of his powers, therefore he had, nevertheless, patients to await their ripening. Feeling that the highest mission had been entrusted to him,

he seems to have said to himself, like Milton, "I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrated of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem, not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men and of famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that which is praiseworthy."

To break away from the law against his father's advice, and to seek support from his art among strangers, required resolution which only his loyalty to his art could justify. In Baltimore, his flute brought him a bare maintenance, and left him leisure for study and for poetry. He felt that the time had come when he could open his lips. A long poem took shape, and he hoped to find in New York an editor who would publish it. But a visit to that city only showed him the "wooden-headedness" of many persons who were leaders there in literary matters. Yet he was not discouraged. "I remember" he wrote, "that it was always

so, that the new man has always to work his way over these Alps of stupidity. ----- The more I am thrown against these people here, and the reverses I suffer at their hands, the more confident I am of beating them finally; that is, to teach them better things and noble modes of living."

Just as he seemed to have conquered success enough to assure him a little leisure to write his poems, his feeble but resolute hold upon earth was exhausted, and on September 7, 1881 his "unfaltering will rendered its supreme submission to the adorned will of God."

It is still too soon to decide what Lanier's place will be in literature. Meanwhile we heartily give him welcome, and congratulate his native South on a new poet.