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James Stephens?

Oliver St. John Gogarty

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A TRIBUTE
TO
JAMES STEPHENS, 1882 - 1950

*No thought had I
Save that the moon was fair,
And fair the sky,
And God was everywhere:
I chanted, as the wind went by,
A poet's prayer.*

"THE WHISPERER"



PORTRAIT by PATRICK J. TUOHY, R.H.A.

Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland

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JAMES STEPHENS

By OLIVER ST. JOHN GOGARTY*

*Plotinus, the philosopher, our contemporary,
seemed ashamed of being with the body.*

PLUTARCH

“THE point is: how many men have loved you? Women, yes; but I am not talking about sexual love. How many men have loved you?”

Stephens and I were discussing what was the measure of success in life. Money? We knew many rich people and we did not care whether they knew us or not. It was one of those desultory conversations where you had to be careful that the greatness of your companion did not escape you so natural and easy came the talk. I had just quoted my favorite quotation appropriately enough from another great lyricist, “To be happy is the chiefest prize, to be glorious the next lot,” (Pindar) when I had to admit that Stephens’ was as good a test as any and as original as it was right. If you have been loved by men, that is the test of a successful life.

It may appear strange to begin by a proof of Stephens’ philosophical outlook instead of appraising his lyrical gifts; but James Stephens behind a mask of light laughter has been a philosopher, and a wise one since he first began to write and that was when he was 21 years old. In 1902 or 1903 when Arthur Griffith was struggling along on a salary of \$4.25 a week, and wondering where he could get enough copy to fill his weekly paper *Sinn Féin*, which is Gaelic and means in English “We ourselves,” James Stephens gave him as a gift the first serial rights of a book

* Permission to publish this chapter from Dr. Gogarty’s forthcoming book, *The Nine Worthies*, has kindly been given by Oliver D. Gogarty, his son and literary executor.

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that later on was to fetch \$100 for a copy of the first edition. It is world famous now and needs no praise from me; but it is worth recording that Stephens, when he was on a salary hardly more than that Griffith was receiving, gave him all he had. I cannot say for certain that it was from a sense of nationality, though the spirit of the nation was moving strongly and it would have inspired Stephens more than most. I rather think that it was chiefly because of his admiration for the integrity and devotion of the self-sacrificing Arthur Griffith that Stephens made his contribution. When the historian asks how many men loved Griffith, I will concede to Stephens; and I loved Griffith as much as I ever loved any man.

James Stephens, when I knew him first, worked as a scrivener (we call it "stenographer" now) in the office of the attorneys, Mecredy & Sons of 92 Merrion Square, Dublin, next door to my old friend Sir Lambert Ormsby. It is said that in Mecredy's office there was no one to approach Stephens for expertness. Never had the firm such a clerk. Yet this did not move it to give Stephens more than a mere subsistence wage.

His \$4.50 a week were to be reduced even more "on account of increased expenses" — a member was about to elope to Canada. "So I sacked myself," James Stephens asserted.

My friend the bibliophile James A. Healy of New York came across a description of James Stephens by no less a person than the late Earl Grey. It was inserted in a first edition of *The Crock of Gold* which Lord Grey presented to Clara Kirchhoffer Christmas 1912. The recipient wrote, "He loved this book, and so do I. C.K."

I quote it because it shows what a judge of character was that statesman, Lord Grey; and how well *The Crock of Gold* was received. But I quote it particularly for the last few lines which bear out in a sentence or two the fortitude of the poet, a fortitude which I have hailed, and owing to which I have included him among The Worthies of our time.

James Stephens is quite young, about twenty-seven, married, has two children, receives twenty-five shillings a week as a shorthand writer, has had a life so varied that it would need a life quite as long as his own to tell all about it. . . . He has been hungry for weeks as a boy, has slept in the parks, has fought with a swan for a piece of bread, has tramped the roads, has lived on the kindness of poor people who liked the queer little boy, and yet he has grown up with the most independent

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spirit and nobody could get a whimper out of him. He has grit all through, with tireless energy, humor and inquisitiveness: he is a born Bohemian, small in stature but quite big inside, large and roomy."

With Lord Grey's compliments.

"He has grit all through." This quality endeared him to the distinguished Englishman. It is enough to endear him to any Irishman, even to one inimical to the Muses — if ever such an Irishman existed.

I used to meet him of an evening when his work was over. Then he would recite some of the lyrics, "on which I have been sitting all day long in the office, keeping them warm like a hen on a nest of eggs." He could keep three or four lyrics in his head until he got leisure to complete them. What energy was his after ten hours in an office and what creative energy was left in his small body cannot be explained by taking Stephens for a mortal man. He neighbors nearer to an immortal; and I do not mean this figuratively. True, he was an athlete and represented Ireland in international gymnastic contests. Nevertheless, undernourished as his body undoubtedly was, judging by human standards, his work and energy can be explained only by taking him for a supernatural being to whom human existence is of no account. It may sound ridiculous in this age of pedestrianism and science to take such a view of any inhabitant of this globe of ours; but science is veering round to the miraculous, and I am far ahead of science when it comes to a belief in that. So here I affirm that James Stephens is a leprechaun who knows where he has hidden his crock of gold. You have only to look at those wonderful eyes of his lit by the light that never was on sea or land to realize the truth of my affirmation. There never was a man whose genius was nearer to the surface. He is all genius just as a leprechaun is an immaterial and a supernatural thing. A leprechaun has very little in common with our mortality. He is young and old and impish all at the same time. Age does not touch him. His emotions are not ours. There is on his face a look of mischief but only when confronted by the curiosity of human beings. He then can be splenetic: all the imp comes out in him. If he is caught he becomes enraged. I have never seen James Stephens in a rage. He is too old and wise for that. All I know of him is that he is a gleeman, and that he has joy always at his command. It takes

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no time at all before he will swing his head sideways and break into melody: "O the brown and the yellow ale!" His body sways with song. All around him is transformed. So are his hearers. They have been swept away from worldly cares, and all that is of the earth earthy. Their souls begin to soar and sing with his; and they have entered a region where all is understandable and where their wits are sharpened and multiplied. Their surroundings vanish and they are in a green hill under the earth in a land of enchantment. I have been there and I know it.

If this were not true I would have sympathy for James Stephens. I would give him credit for a fortitude that is super-human, for his power of projecting away from himself what would be tragedy for mortal men. But he is not of this earth. He is nearer to what we call Nature than any poet who ever lived. He feels with the rabbit and the trapped beastie just as Robbie Burns felt. It is of Burns you think when you look at Stephens' eyes; but though the eyes of Burns were large and burning, Stephens' eyes are too big for his face and so, passing the lines on his face, you are held only by his eyes. Those eyes see more life, "the quiet sunniness," when all is still than any eyes on earth. He has said that the hind legs of a young donkey are the daintiest things you could see. His eyes have taken in all that is lovely in a wild way that owes nothing to mankind —

And there the goats, day after day,
Stray in sunny quietness,
Cropping here and cropping there,
As they pause and turn and pass,
Now a bit of heather spray,
Now a mouthful of the grass. . . .

If I were as wise as they
I would stray apart and brood,
I would beat a hidden way
Through the quiet heather spray,
To a sunny solitude. . . .

And should you come, I'd run away,
I would make an angry sound,
I would stare and turn and bound
To the deeper quietude,
To the place where nothing stirs,
In the silence of the furze.

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"An angry sound!" I can see the Goat Foot himself staring, snorting and then hoofing off to a place where nothing stirs. Don't tell me that the author of that is not a leprechaun who, in spite of the cry "Pan is dead," may be the great god diminished and dispersed to Ireland, that land of lingering gods where his spirit finds the noontide silence congenial in valleys heady with the fragrance of the golden furze. What a picture of the wild dells of the hills of Ireland are evoked by the few lines I have quoted!

I often wondered why anyone reads a poet's prose when they can get a whole volume out of a few lines of his poetry. Stephens has answered for himself. "A young writer," he says — and you might well think that he was thinking of himself — "will discover that in the matter of mental and physical energy he is superhumanly endowed; so highly vitalised indeed that he is prepared to affront any mass or magnitude that can be presented to him: and he will inevitably arrive at the opinion that poetry alone cannot absorb the torrent that he actually is. He will turn hopefully to prose."

Then there is another consideration. It is the sad fact that in every generation there are only about five hundred persons endowed with the sense organ to appreciate poetry. They must go to his prose if they are to approach a poet at all.

Stephens is simpler, wiser, less personal and more lyrical than Yeats. Yeats writes of a "more learned rhythm." There is no room for learning in a lyric; but there is every room for wisdom. That is why I began writing about Stephens' philosophy. His is the wisdom of something as detached and as old as the hills and the valleys. His lines about the rabbit caught in a snare deal with the origin of evil where even God is distraught.

Not only is Stephens lyrical but he is musical. He is a musician though it is only ballads and faery music that attract him. This is as it should be. Yeats was tone deaf but that did not prevent him from being a poet and a great one. Stephens has an ear for music which is a different ear from that of verse. The ballad he sang to me, "O the brown and the yellow ale," he told me was sung to him by the father of James Joyce. The Joyces were a musical family. It is said that James Joyce would have preferred recognition as a singer to recognition as a writer.

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Ireland used to be full of *shanacies*, that is, professional story tellers. They have nearly all gone now for their place has been taken by the ubiquitous vulgarian, the radio. James Stephens is the last of the *shanacies*. You should see how the faces of little children light up when James Stephens comes into a room. Maybe, he will run in hurriedly with, "I am the last of the giant killers." You would think that he had just come from an encounter with a giant when he begins to entrance them with a story. Perhaps it would be well to add children to those whose love is a test of a successful life.

To turn to Stephens' friendship with Arthur Griffith (and they were life-long friends) here is an example of the way Stephens would pull Griffith's leg. "Griffith, you hate England." Griffith would grunt, pull at his tie and refrain from committing himself. But Stephens would take it for granted, and, "Very well, then. I will tell you of two ways of getting rid of England. First of all, you must get an aeroplane to drop a bomb on Beecham's pill factory. Then all the English would die of constipation within a month. Then you must get an enormous saw, an enormous saw." A pause.

By this time Griffith would have seen that he had to cooperate in the joke.

"What's the saw for?"

"To cut off three hundred feet from the tops of our mountains so that the rain would fall down and drown out England instead of swamping us."

It must have been AE who put Stephens before the world. You may write to the best of readers but, nowadays, unless you have "publicity" you get nowhere. "Publicity" is that form of information which takes the place of education in the masses.

And so, that gentlest and kindest of men, AE, could not have rested until he had used all his influence and his powers of persuasion to help the man he admired and loved. AE's humor was of the oaken variety. I remember, no, I only recall that he recited some lines he had composed on James Stephens usurping the Heavenly Throne. James Stephens cannot remember them, nor have I asked him to write them for me. He began at the beginning. I could quote only the last line where God is coaxingly invited to call Stephens, 'James.' A trivial thing but such things show how much thought AE gave Stephens when

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he got into his verse. I don't believe that there is another person there except one and he was the subject of AE's rare invective. So this gives me the excuse I was looking for to introduce some verses I wrote to James Stephens when he left us in Dublin for London.

Where are you, Spirit, who could pass into our hearts and all
Hearts of little children, hearts of trees and hills and elves?
Where is the pen that could, sweetly deep and whimsical,
Make old poets sing again far better than themselves?

You passed through all our past worst time, and proved yourself
no caitiff.

America then listened to a voice too dear for wealth;
Then you went to London where I fear you have gone native;
Too long in a metropolis will tax a poet's health.

It's not as if you had no wit, and cared for recognition;
A mind that lit the Liffey could emblazon all the Thames,
But we're not ourselves without you and we long for coalition;
Oh, half of Erin's energy! What can have happened, James?

I am glad to see that though these lines were written many years ago that I thought then as I do now about my friend.

The allusion in his having "passed through all our past worst times" is to the days when Dublin had the Black and Tans, troops apparently answerable to no authority, loosed upon it. There is also a reference which is so concealed that nobody who took the trouble to read the lines could guess that it referred to "Hunger," a short essay full of the understanding of hunger and its anguish which Stephens wrote, alas, from experience composed. As for making old poets sing far better than themselves: Stephens wrote a volume of poetry which he called *Reincarnations*. They were more than translations from the Gaelic poets, they were actual incarnations of those poets in himself. What other man in Ireland could do the like? There is one poem of Blind Raftery on Ballylee which will bear description. Raftery was a Mayo man who came to the chief town of the adjoining county, Galway, and made his living by "playing music to empty pockets." Like thousands and thousands of the people at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the last, he had contracted smallpox which swept the country and, added to other disfigurements, often made the

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survivors blind. It mattered little that it prevented Raftery from seeing to read. He was probably illiterate in any case. It left him with enough sight to see one of those extraordinary appearances in every century or two in court or cottage, a perfect example of female beauty — Mary Hynes of Ballylee. Raftery's lines translated by Stephens are inevitably improved, for the feat alone of turning the voluble Gaelic into an equivalent in not so fluid English constitutes an improvement.

This is the longed-for sight of Mary Hynes whom Raftery called "The Blossom of the Branches."

Lovely and airy
The view from the hill
That looks down Ballylee;
But no good sight is good until
By great good luck you see
The Blossom of the Branches
Coming towards you
Airily.

Note the repetition of *good* which is the note of the poem and the vowel rhymes in *Lovely* and *good* and *look*; and the *i* in *airy*, *view*, *hill*, *until*. There is no need to bare the ribs of poetry. This is one of the lightest and loveliest lyrics I know. An idea of the liquidity of the Gaelic, a thing hidden from most of us, comes through in this "reincarnation," so happily called, of Stephens.

There is another poem of Raftery which luckily Stephens did not miss. It is called "The County of Mayo" and is a famous poem. The poet feeling that age, that state detested by the Irish, is coming on him — and it came on the men of the eighteenth century before they were forty — wants to visit the town where he was born in Mayo. The town is said to be Ballinamore. The poem is full of nostalgia and ends, "If I were there among my folks and then,/Old age would never find me and I'd be young again." There is one passage in this poem which is remarkable not because I quoted it in one of my lectures, but because it is one of the few examples in all poetry of what I called "a magic casement." A magic casement is, of course, from Keats; but it may be used to exemplify how the page seems to open and the vision of the poet manifested before us. Raftery is going along the roads of Mayo, helping his poor eyes by his

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stick no doubt; but the sight of the inner eye is all the brighter for the darkness outside. He is naming well known places, among them Lough Carra, on which lake stands the ancestral hall of George Moore. Well, let us get on to the magic case-ment at the end of this stanza:

I say and swear my heart leaps up like the rising of the tide,
Rising like the rising wind till fog and mist must go
When I remember Carra, and Gallen close beside;
And the Gap of the Two Bushes and the wide plain of Mayo.

The Gap of the Two Bushes is used as a frame for the sudden expanse of the rich pastures on the wide plain. Burns, Maccauley, Swinburne have opened magic casements. You have to go back to Homer or to Vergil for another. There is no need to point out to the reader the artistry of the repetitions in this reincarnation from the Gaelic of Raftery.

The character of a nation can be safely deduced from its language and, therefore, there is sure to be some distortion when an Irish mind tries to write poetry in English. The bald statement will not satisfy the Gael. What translator can be better than James Stephens who combines the character of the poet disembodied mingled in spirit with the influence of the ancient hills?

In America Stephens found two patrons. W. J. Howe, the bibliophile of Cincinnati who was President of the American Book Company, entertained Stephens during his lecture tour. Stephens' health could not endure the strain of the incessant journeys and he became ill and had to go to the hospital. This, even had his lecture agent not been just as rapacious as most lecture agents are, was enough to diminish his purse and leave him with little enough to return to Ireland. Another American who admired the poet met him in New York. Here let me pay tribute to one of the most generous human beings who ever walked in shoe leather, as the saying is. Cornelius Sullivan of Wall Street took Stephens in hand, "invested" his residue and sent him back happy and prosperous. It was not necessary for Stephens' happiness to be prosperous but it helped.

I have referred to AE's interest in James Stephens. AE was interested in all poets and he might be called The Poet Maker as Warwick was called The King Maker. But sometimes

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he permitted his interest in a man to dictate what to do in the way of writing. It is the general impression that when he persuaded Stephens to spend his spirit in reviving the dry bones of the kings and queens of Irish mythology, he gave James Stephens a task quite unsuited to his genius, which can fill a present day with sunshine and give bird, beast and men in it a whimsical personality of their own.

Yeats could be very distant with those who were not intimates, in fact, offensively so as he must have been to the late Sir William Watson. His intimacy with Stephens may be gauged from the following confidence of Yeats, who, as is well known, was tone-deaf. But to confess it was something. He told Stephens,

"Stephens, I know only one tune."

"What one is that?"

"It is God save the King. I know it because the people stand up when it is played."

"You know two," Stephens assured him.

"Do I?" Yeats wondered hopefully.

"You know God save the Queen."

In 1947 Dublin University conferred on James Stephens the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature. I like to think of the different ways men have taken to preserve their fame: Academies, Literary Societies and Immortal Companies. The one I contemplate with the most pleasure is the honorary degree of a University because the recipient will be welcomed into its Hall of Fame in the immortal language of those who are accustomed to deal with Eternity. I have been given by the Public Orator of Dublin University the Latin text of the oration which welcomed James Stephens, and I here render a translation which is somewhat free:

Litt. D.
James Stephens

We have of recent years honored two Irish poets, William Butler Yeats and James Sullivan Starkey. To-day we are followed by a third, JAMES STEPHENS, whose genius is so varied that some critics compare him with Aeschylus, some with Milton, while others regard his gift as mainly, if not entirely, lyric. When expert opinion is so divided, what wonder that a Public Orator should lose his bearings: *Stat et incertus qua sit sibi, nescit eundum.*

But it may at least be safely said that

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Howe'er posterity shall view these deeds JAMES STEPHENS will always have a place among the Muses' chief priests. In his presentation of the immensities — Eternity, Space, Force — in his picture of the Lord walking in the deserted garden, in his account of what Thomas said in a pub about the anger of the Almighty "he passes beyond what is simply human and becomes a voice for the Spirit of Poetry;" *musas ipsas audire videaris*, of prose writers too, as everybody knows, he is in the first rank. It is scarcely necessary to cite *The Demigods*, *The Charwoman's Daughter* and the most widely known perhaps of all his works, *The Crock of Gold*. To one so eminent the most enthusiastic applause is due.

Thus was the most lyrical poet writing in English summoned to supper with the gods.



JAMES STEPHENS: DUBLIN — PARIS — RETURN

By BIRGIT BRAMSBÄCK

THE literary career of James Stephens falls into four periods: 1. His first Dublin period until May 1913; 2. His Paris period from May 1913 until August 1915 (with the exception of the months of August, September and October 1914 which were spent in Dublin); 3. His second Dublin period from August 1915 until January 1925; 4. His London, or "emigration," period which came to an end with his death on December 26, 1950. This last period was one of increasing personal tragedy and declining creative power; it was, however, interspersed with exciting lecture tours to the United States, frequent visits to Paris, an evacuation period in the Cotswolds during the Second World War, and a few visits to Dublin, his native town. It seems that it was not merely personal reasons that urged Stephens to give up his post in the National Gallery of Ireland and finally settle in London after his return from one of his lecture tours to the United States in 1925. Ireland during and after the Civil War was a country marked by scars and bitter hatreds and, to Stephens, London society must have been not only a wonderful escape but also an irresistible lure.