June 1946

His Soul Goes Marching On

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 1, no.15, June 1946, p.237-239

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.
to him by those who apparently had no knowledge of Professor Richardson’s revealing note on its authorship. In this poem, written late in his life, in a time of financial stress and illness, he pays fervent tribute to that “free-born spirit” which, he says in a letter to Dr. Moore, he hopes no misfortune will ever be able to tame in him. Let his tribute be represented here by these four lines from the poem:

Thy spirit, Independence, let me share!
Lord of the lion-heart and eagle-eye,
Thy steps I follow with my bosom bare,
Nor heed the storm that howls along the sky.

The special claim of this book to a place in the Colby Library has been suggested by the incidental encomiums in the course of this account on the typographical work of the press of the Foulis Brothers in Glasgow. These printers were famous for the excellence and beauty of the books from their press, not only in Scotland and England, but also on the Continent. It is very fitting that an example of the work of these distinguished printers should find a place in the library that has the good fortune to own the Book Arts Collection with its numerous other examples of fine printing.

According to the records of the Union Catalog in the Library of Congress, the Colby copy of the Glasgow edition of the Ode to Independence is one of only three copies now in American libraries. The other two copies are recorded as being in The New York Public Library (the Owen D. Young collection) and in the University of Texas Library in Austin. In the libraries of Great Britain I have found only six copies on record. The Glasgow edition of 1773 is indeed a rarity.

HIS SOUL GOES MARCHING ON

JOHN BROWN, with the aid of twenty-one other men, raided the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry on the night of October 16, 1859. The next day Brown was captured. Two
days later he was committed to the jail at Charlestown, Virginia (now West Virginia), and on October 31 he was convicted of treason and murder. He was hanged at Charlestown on December 2. Two weeks before his execution he wrote the following letter to his cousin:

19th Nov. 1859.
Rev Luther Humphrey
My Dear friend

Your kind letter of the 12th inst. is now before me. So far as my knowledge goes as to our mutual kindred: I suppose I am the first since the landing of Peter Brown from the Mayflower that has either been sentenced to imprisonment; or to the Gallows. But my dear old friend, let not that fact alone grieve you. You cannot have forgotten how and where our Grandfather Capt. John Brown fell in 1776; and that he too might have perished on the scaffold had circumstances been but very little different. The fact that a man dies under the hand of an executioner (or otherwise) has but little to do with his true character, as I suppose. John Rogers perished at the stake a great and good man as I suppose: but his being so does not prove that any other man who has died in the same way was good, or otherwise.

Whether I have any reason to "be of good cheer" (or not) in view of my end, I can assure you that I feel so; and that I am totally blinded if I do not really experience that strengthening and consolation you so faithfully implore in my behalf. God of our Fathers, reward your fidelity. I neither feel mortified, degraded, nor in the least ashamed of my imprisonment, my chain, or my near prospect of death by hanging. I feel assured "that not one hair shall fall from my head without my heavenly Father." I also feel that I have long been endeavouring to hold exactly "such a fast as God has chosen." See the passage in Isaiah which you have quoted. No part of my life has been more happily spent than that I have spent here; and I humbly trust that no part has been spent to better purpose. I would not say this boastingly: but "thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory: through Infinite grace."

I should be sixty years old were I to live till May 9th, 1860. I have enjoyed much of life as it is, and have been remarkably prosperous; having early learned to regard the welfare and prosperity of others as my own. I have never since I can remember required a great amount of sleep: so that I conclude that I have already enjoyed full an average number of waking hours with those who reach their "three-score years and ten." I have not as yet been driven to the use of glasses; but can still see to read and write quite comfortably. But more than that I have generally enjoyed remarkably good health. I might go on to
recount unnumbered and unmerited blessings among which would be some very severe afflictions; and those the most needed blessings of all. And now when I think how easily I might be left to spoil all I have done, or suffered in the cause of freedom: I hardly dare risk another voyage; if I even had the opportunity.

It is a long time since we met; but we shall now soon come together in our "Father's house," I trust. "Let us hold fast that we already have," "remembering that we shall reap in due time if we faint not." "Thanks be ever unto God, who giveth us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord." And now my old warm-hearted friend, "Good bye."

Your Affectionate Cousin JOHN BROWN

This letter—the original two-page holograph written in a clear, firm hand—has been added to the file of autograph letters in the Colby College Library, thanks to the interest and generosity of Mrs. B. K. Emerson, of Amherst, Massachusetts. The letter was published in 1885 in F. B. Sanborn's Life and Letters of John Brown (Boston, second edition, 1891, p. 594) but with a number of variations in the text of the letter and with a great many variations in the punctuation. Sanborn read "chains" for "chain," "working hours" for "waking hours," and "wish another voyage" for "risk another." He inserted words not found in the original letter, e.g., "the will of" before "my heavenly father"; and he omitted other words, such as "still" before "see to read," and "as" before "yet." He ignores all of John Brown's underlinings of words, shown above in italics. We have accordingly transcribed the letter in its entirety, following Sanborn’s example of printing it as if composed of four paragraphs; the original is not divided into paragraphs at all. But is it not an extremely interesting communication? John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on.

TWO NOTES FROM EMILY DICKINSON

THE excellent article on Emily Dickinson by Professor Whicher in last February's Atlantic Monthly has served to direct attention anew to the Amherst poet. We are happy