

**MANCHESTER POETRY:
WITH AN
INTRODUCTORY ESSAY**

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Manchester Poetry: With an Introductory Essay by James Wheeler

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JAMES WHEELER

**MANCHESTER POETRY:
WITH AN
INTRODUCTORY ESSAY**

TO

LORD FRANCIS EGERTON,

A PATRON AND ORNAMENT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE,

THIS VOLUME

IS DEDICATED BY

THE EDITOR.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY.

THE task of writing an introductory essay, at no time very attractive, is one of peculiar difficulty and delicacy when the work to be ushered into the world consists of the productions of townsmen, and those townsmen "poets." On the one hand an editor's reserve will be cavilled at if he say too little; on the other his assurance will be chastised if he talk too largely; so that between the two extremes some prudence is requisite to guide him safely to the goal.

"Manchester Poetry!" exclaim doubtless the majority of those who may chance to bestow a passing glance upon the book—

"Bless us! what a word on
A title-page is this!"—

and, as if satisfied in their own minds that this same town cannot produce any good thing save only such as emanates

from the spindle or the power-loom, they indulge, it may be, in a slight laugh at the presumption of the editor, and go on their way rejoicing.

It is, indeed, unfortunately the fact that, except in rare instances, the few scientific and literary men whom Manchester could boast have been content to hide their light under a bushel, passing from the stage of life without recording their title to any degree of fame beyond the immediate precincts of their own homesteads. As for popularity, "poor and content was rich and rich enough;" they sought not the applause of the multitude; they knew that a venal criticism might be purchased; and aware of the worthlessness of fame so procured, they had, too, the philosophy to disregard it.

Thus it is that strangers have weekly and daily visited the town, nay are even yet visiting it, only as a great manufacturing depôt. They have heard of its skilfulness in all manner of handicraft; rumour has spoken of its inhabitants as a people "whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers the honourable of the earth," and they have come up in a spirit of curiosity to inspect its spinning-jennies and power-looms, to take note of this apparatus or of that cog-wheel,

and, exclaiming "wonderful" at every turn, have departed at last with the impression that Manchester is indeed the most mechanical of boroughs! But for any qualities intellectual or imaginative, not having dreamed of the possibility, they have not paused to inquire into the fact, of their existence.

Nor can we wonder. The antipathy of men of trade to the pursuits of literature is as ancient as the hills, and seems likely to endure as long. In the early days of commerce men rose from their beds at day-break, partook with their apprentices and workmen the homely meal of porridge from a common platter set in the midst of a deal table—betook them to their toil till nightfall—then hied to the tobacco-clouded atmosphere of a tavern for their glass and gossip—and by nine o'clock were laid a-bed, dreaming off the fumes of their carousal. In such a state of society, literature was of course a luxury unknown and disregarded. But it is strange that in these later days, when the learned professions are crowded with the aspiring scions of commerce, and the senate too often groans under the inflictions of counting-house eloquence, instead of finding an elevation of men's tastes correspondent with the growth of their means, the aversion to literary

pursuits should have lost so little of its force. It is to be feared, indeed, that there are even yet men—and those among the most prosperous in the class of old-fashioned traders—who deem the coarse vulgarity and narrow apprehension of a mind uncultivated to be the best *materiel* whereof to frame a good tradesman; and though generally it is not now, as once, that the pilgrims of trade enter on their career without education, it yet seems to be deemed for the most part that the education of books should begin and end at school, or at least that “Tooke on prices,” or the “city article” of a daily paper, is the only literature cognizable by a disciple of the counting-house.

It is a curious phenomenon, too, in the history of the commercial communities of modern days, that the literary taste discouraged in the outset of life, seldom gives any sign of vitality in the maturer days of men of this class. It is common to find those who, after a life of laborious industry, the latter part spent perhaps in sighing for “a few short years between the grave and the desk,” retire at length to enjoy their decline with some little splendour, rearing stately mansions, and surrounding themselves with costly works of art, paintings, sculpture, and *bijouterie*;

others may be seen working themselves slowly into the dignity of local potentates, and surmounting the arduous summits of parochial oratory; whilst with not a few the spirit of philanthropy and Christian beneficence, pent up in early life, bursts forth in its sunset to fertilize and adorn the field of their respective neighbourhoods. But, among this class, literature, if it have patrons—and it has a few—finds no disciples. There may be those who browse in half-awakened ease upon the sunny side of Parnassus; but there are none who in the spirit of humble pilgrimage attempt the arduous and barren heights whose pinnacle is the retreat of the Muses. With these fair ladies, indeed, even the higher faculties of mind which trade and manufactures call into exercise seem to have no sympathy. Manchester has been the nursery of all those wonderful mechanists whose discoveries gave birth to modern commerce, and are now enriching the world; and yet, so far as our knowledge goes, none of these giant intellects ever allied themselves with other—and shall we say loftier—studies. Mechanical genius stands alone in the field of intellect;—and so likewise the peculiar properties which characterize a “Manchester Man,” whilst they exist not in other spheres, are rarely found linked with *other* high mental qualities.

Despite all this, however—*malgré* the impression which smoke and machinery may be supposed to have upon the brain—it is with no little pride that we can count over the names of those eminent men who in a former age have arisen from our population—who have enlightened the world with their genius—and who sank into their honored rest with the sweet lullaby of fame upon their dying ear. It needs not that they should be enumerated. Suffice it that the renowned in science will not blush to enrol the name of a Henry among their archives—that the immortal in art will be only too proud to find the inspired Liveraeege of their number! And if it were compatible with the design of this essay to speak of those who are yet walking in our streets, and with whom we have yet the privilege of holding earthly converse, we would whisper into the ear of philosophy the name of Dalton, and demand if it be a slight thing to make boast of *him*;—we would call a council of the poets, and present Charles Swain to the proudest in their ranks,—and if there be any that are still sceptical, we would ask them to listen to his reception there!

In some respects, therefore, Manchester may have little or no ground for complaint or lasting despondency. Great *progress* has been made since the days when Arkwright