

THIS POET LAUREATE BUSINESS

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WE are a curiously conservative people. The capital of the Empire has still a corner where, until quite lately, the curfew was sounded and the night watchman went his rounds, calling the hours. In that same capital can be found guardians of the Tower in Elizabethan ruffs and, annually, a Lord Mayor's procession with gilded coaches and bewigged coachmen. It is with these anachronisms that we are accustomed to reckon the perpetuation of the office of Poet Laureate. For most people—even for people who care for poetry—the title has lost all meaning. We may go still further, and assert that in many cases the holders of the office themselves refuse to take it seriously. Some of them have failed even to comply with its very light obligations, and regard it solely as an honour without corresponding responsibilities. So useless and despised a relic of the past, it may be thought, should go the way of the Court Fool and, like the cap and bells of that functionary, disappear from sight and hearing. The present writer, on the contrary, holds that the idea behind the appointment of a Poet Laureate is of the utmost importance, and he begs leave to say why he thinks so.

It was in something that the present holder of the office—Mr. John Masefield—once said that I first found the clue to the meaning of the title he bears. He was addressing the Welsh Eisteddfod, an annual gathering wherein prizes are awarded for band-playing, choral singing, elocutionary performances and the reading of essays and poems. The reader of the poem judged the best is elected National Bard for the year. This assembly represents therefore the culture of Wales in its different aspects, and the bard in particular is the cultural representative of the whole people. That will enable us to understand the relevance of Mr. Masefield's remarks. And this is what he said:

In the days of long ago there was one culture for everybody. The King who employed a bard shared his poetry with his subjects. Now, however, there has been a separation of the culture of the Court and the culture of the people, and a great separation of the bard from the heart of the world.

In appreciating the significance of that utterance we must remember the background. It seems clear that Mr. Masefield

was envying the public honour accorded his fellow bard as the representative of a national culture that had not altogether lost its unity.

We have to go back some distance in our history as a people in order to find a parallel to the state of things to which the popularity of the Eisteddfod bears witness. But if we do go back far enough, we shall find it. Speaking of Early English Poetry, Mr. Herbert Read in his *Phases of Poetry* says:

We have the fact that the community accepts the poetry, makes it part of its life and hands it down as a living tradition. Poetry . . . was part of daily life; it was not an esoteric mystery, not something to be hidden in the privacy of the library, not cabinet literature, but a social instrument, an open celebration, a common possession.

That is no mere theory. There did really exist in England an artistic culture which, finding its expression in church-building, and the religious drama, was shared in by the whole people irrespective of class. It was in this tradition that the Elizabethan dramatists found themselves. They had a public, ranging from the Court to the ragamuffin of the streets, which could appreciate plays such as now would be patronised by only one section of society. The public to which they appealed was the English nation, and they could make that appeal because the distinction between "high-brow" and "low-brow" was far less then than it is to-day.

Now perhaps we can see the meaning of the Poet Laureateship. Just as the King represents the whole Empire on the political side, the Poet Laureate is supposed to represent us culturally. He is the literary symbol of our race.

Will the desirability of the cultivation of the racial spirit and its preservation in a worthy literature be questioned? To affirm the necessity of a racial culture is not to deny the claims of the rest of the world. It does not forbid the study of Homer and Dante and Goethe. We should remain sterile if we could not carry home with us the pollen from the gardens of Greece, Italy, Germany or wherever else poetry has flourished. The narrow view which would exclude all foreign influences is doomed to destroy what it professes to love. There must be free trade in Letters, or we shall revert to barbarism. More than ever to-day, happily, the barriers of ignorance which divide people from people are down. The world has shrunk, bringing us all, for our mutual good, nearer one another. We must have no Customs Duty to check the trade in wit and fancy. But it may be noted that the greatest contributions to world literature have been made precisely by those

who loved their own land and people best. The Bible was written by men whose outlook was narrowly nationalistic. That he should be an exile from his native Florence nearly broke Dante's heart. Shakespeare knew no country but his own, and could not read the untranslated classics. It is when poetry smacks of the soil in which it has grown, and is most passionately loyal to the native genius of which it is born, that it travels furthest afield. Therefore we must pay no heed to the snobbish cosmopolitanism which would sacrifice the home-made article for that which bears a foreign brand, and does so just *because* it bears a foreign brand.

We may even claim that there is special need to see that we do not suffer deterioration in the quality of the home-made article. As we become politically decentralised, compensation can be made by the development of a distinctive racial culture binding together all the scattered parts of the Empire. Perhaps I should say, an imperial culture superior to differences of race. That would be a bond of enormous strength, more enduring than the economic or merely sentimental tie. A cultural federation having its roots in the soul of a people would be a true indication of imperial unity, and would outlast political changes and prove a permanent monument. Such a bond already exists in our great writers—in Chaucer, in Shakespeare, in Dickens. But this tradition needs its living representative, the man to whom we can point as embodying in his writings the contemporary native spirit of our people. That is where the Poet Laureate comes in.

The conception which Whitman held of his office as the self appointed bard of "these States" illustrates our thesis. I say Whitman's conception, not his performance, which is another matter altogether. Whitman's verse, as a matter of fact, is not representative. It is too doctrinaire, too lacking in humour and in the other qualities which make a popular appeal. His following has been among the intellectuals, rather than among those whom he set out to celebrate. But his deliberate effort to make himself, as a poet, fully representative of American democracy, and the way he prepared himself for the task, exactly fulfilled the ideals suggested by the Poet Laureateship. No one in modern days has so clearly seen as he the vocation of the old-time bard.

It is by a personal exemplification that a native culture is best fostered. Cultural racialism is seeking in these days strange methods whereby to achieve its ends. By dictatorial enactments, by a mechanical propaganda, by the State control of universities and the exclusion from academic life of those who refuse to march in step with the political authorities of the hour, it is hoped to pro-

duce a really national literature. Whether these methods will succeed in the countries where they are being tried may be well questioned, for culture requires for its development an atmosphere of freedom. But most certainly they would not succeed with us. It was not so that our great literary tradition was built up, and it is not so that it can be maintained. Scarcely more practicable is the idea, sometimes mooted, of an Academy on the lines of that which exists in France. We must draw a distinction here between creating a culture and organising it. An Academy may organise literary and artistic forces already in existence, but cannot initiate them. For that, we must have the personal factor, the individual genius.

Some have seen in such agencies as the British Broadcasting Corporation the means by which the object in view can be achieved. But here again we are met by the fact that the Wireless merely uses existing talent, and makes no profession of creating fresh talent. Nor does it synthesise the various types of artistry and schools of learning to which it affords a platform. Where there is conflict, it gives both sides a hearing. Its method is like that of the party system in politics, which in practice means a rotation of the different elements in our political life. No more than does the party system do the wireless agencies attempt to coalesce the conflicting features of a people's cultural life. But it is just this coalescence that is required. It was this that the Elizabethans achieved, and nothing less than this will suffice. But to bring it about we need "the crowd-man" in literature, the poet who is an incarnation and sublimation of his public, an Everyman to make articulate the thought and emotion of those whom Chesterton calls "the Secret People".

That is a big demand to make, and the question may be well asked how it is to be met. It is a difficult question to answer, but I believe that the solution lies in the fact that demand creates supply. When we are tired of the present cultural confusion, when we weary of barren critical controversies that lead nowhere, when faith is given us in the integrity, consistency and rationality of the spirit that moves in us as a people, then, mysteriously but indubitably, the type of man required will appear. Poets are born, not made, but they are born of the need that cries out for them. They are the gifts of the gods to those who believe in the high mission of poetry and would fain see it fulfilled.

Of a certain medieval poet it has been said by a great authority that he was "the voice from the very depth of the English countryside and the crooked little towns that hide there". What

Langland was for the little England of his day, others may be for the Empire at large. Listening to the murmur of voices, speaking the same mother-tongue, but rising from shores lapped by the Seven Seas, they will translate into abiding song the confused utterances of that great, imperial company. Though the very existence of such men may be unsuspected to-day, and even the possibility of their emergence doubted, we are not to waver in our faith. Perhaps it was chiefly that they should appear that our Rule was established in the four parts of the earth. Perhaps their work will outlive all other tokens of the Empire as Homer has outlived ancient Greece, and Vergil is remembered and loved where Caesar is but a name. Perhaps the work of statesmen and financiers is but the socket in which to place the torch of their genius.