

THE COUNTRY
RHYMES OF
THOMAS GIVEN

This booklet has been produced to celebrate some of the poetry of Cullybackey's Thomas Given (1850 - 1917) who has largely faded from the public memory.

In 1900 he produced a volume of poetry, featuring the work of his brothers and himself, but it was his poetry written in his native Country Antrim Scots that was the better received. His local minister, George Buick, when talking of Thomas's writing, said that "*He is specially happy when using the Doric of his native district as the vehicle of expression.*"

Although he wrote poems that highlighted his concerns for justice, liberty and the political and religious climate of his times, his poetry was particularly strong on themes of nature, with Buick remarking "*He evidently loves nature, and rests in her love*". John Hewitt, who did much to reacquaint us with the traditions of the 'Weaver Poets', recognized Given's place at the end of that tradition and concluded "*Had not Poems from College and Country been in print, it would have been necessary to invent that book, fairly to illustrate the sad end of "an auld sang"*".

We hope that this booklet will bring Given's poetry back to a wider audience and highlight the native Ulster-Scots tradition of writing about *yer ain hame grun*.



A SONG
FOR
FEBRUARY

Day in an' day oot on his auld farrant loom,
Time lengthens the wab o' the past;
Dame Nature steps in like a lamp tae the room,
Hir e'e tae simmer o' life geein bloom.
So Winterslips by, wi' its mirth an' its gloom,
As spring is appearin' at last.

The robin gets up an' he lauchs in his glee,
In view o' the prospect so braw;
Sets his heid tae the side, wi' its feathers agee,
As he spies a bit snae drop at fit o' the tree,
An' says tae himsel' a'll hae denties tae pree
By an' by when the splash is awa.



The blackbird keeks oot frae the fog at the broo,
Gees his neb a bit dicht on a stane;
His eye caught the primrose appearin' in view,
An' the tiny wee violet o' Nature's ain blue;
He sung them a sang o' the auld an' the new –
A sang we may a' let alane.

The thrush cuff't the leaves 'neath the skep o' the bee,
An' he tirl't them aside wae a zest;
I maun hurry awa tae rehearsal, quo he,
This work fits the sparrow far better than me;
His sang pleased the ear frae the tap o' the tree
As he fell intae tune wae the rest.

Thus Nature provides for hir hoose an' hir waness,
An' we may rejoice in the plan;
The wren tae the bluebonnet sings his refrain
On causey o' cottier or lordly domain;
The wagtail looks on without shade o' disdain,
May we aye say the same o' the man.





THE CUCKOO'S STORM

Near the middle o' May, in the year ninety-one,
The snaw like a carpet enveloped the grun;
It fell in the morning unsparing an' thick,
Tae it measured three inches by rule or by stick.

The very thorn hedges wur strange tae the sight,
As the green struggled up through its coverin' o' white;
The wee bit whin blossoms, in rage, seemed to say,
Is this like the simmer we're gaun for tae hae.

If it is, we had better be packin' oor traps,
An' steer away south, frae such wuntry haps;
Leein' Boyd's hill an' e'esore in spectral gloom,
A blank on the landscape for want o' oor bloom.

Then the blackbird got up and he whistled a note
That gaur't ilka feather stan' oot frae his throat,
Though the hail bounced like peas aff his bonnie black gown
He seemed na tae mind, but went on wae his tune.



His song seemd o' hope, and frae it you could draw
That the sunshine o' midday wad scatter the snaw,
Like the dark clouds o' life whun they're heavy an' grim –
They are only the nearer the silver-streaked rim.

The robin stood up on the apple tree high,
An' the gaze o' a critic he turned tae the sky;
Gi'ed his neb a bit dicht on a branch as it hung,
An' thus to the morning in rapture he sung –

Tho' snaw is noo deep in the flowery May,
I hae seen it ten waur about Christmas Day;
When the sun gi'en a blink, then away he was gane,
Leein' sich as me hungry an' caul as a stane.

Then toun was my stomach unless I cud spy
A bit worm when the fother was pu'd tae the kye;
If no, 'neath the thatch, in a shiverin' heap,
Wae the bat an' the sparrow I tried for tae sleep.

Noo why should we mourn at this bluster in May,
That wanna be wi' us the half o' the day:
For mysel' an' the sparrow, we're fairly secure,
We can fadge for, oor pick 'mang the hens at the door.

Thus mankind sae mighty a lesson may learn,
To sing an' be cheerful though prospects be stern;
Though dark clouds may gather, obscuring the licht,
Tae whistle at fortune an' glam for the richt.





Wee feckless mite o' Nature's weans,
Thy tiny strength e'en strength disdains,
Thy beauty gie thee pains
 Tae show or wear it;
Yet mighty man, wae a' his brains,
 Wull ne'er come near it.

Thine e'e o' fire can detect
The snugly-hid unseen insect;
How quickly, tae, ye can dissect
 What's tae your taste!
But ah, ye seem aye tae expect
 Some unknown haste.

You needna turn your head sae quick,
Nor lift your e'e at ilka pick,
Nae fear o' stane or snare or stick
 Need thee alarm;
What han' unboun' tae keyless Nick
 Wad dae thee herm?



An' yet wae thee 'tis Nature's plan
Tae guerd frae herm on every han';
Ye're no' your lane in this auld lan'
 O' show an' screen,
Where treachery frae man tae man
 Is aften seen.

Abune yon bleak an' frozen bog,
E'er simmer wrote its langest log,
I watch'd thee keek beneath the scrog,
 In splendour drest,
For leaves or bits o' saftest fog
 Tae big your nest.

But noo thy work is clean forgot,
Nae young yins cheep aroun' the spot,
Whar yinst ye hid their cosy cot
 Frae schoolboy's e'e;
In a' a lesson you hae taught
 The likes o' me.

Tae be content within the sphere
That is tae us allotted here,
If ower oor pathways creep the brier,
 Ingratitude,
Let's loup abune it wae a cheer,
 As mankin' should.



The snaws o' December in big flaghts were fawin',
The ice in lang stapples hung doon frae the eves
Whun ower a wee ingle auld Betty was thawin'
Hir time-wrinkled cheek an' hir toil-hacket neeves.

For fower score years the bit blossoms o' simmer
Had spread oot their beauties ower scrog an' domain;
The tiny wee sucker had lang grown tae timmer
Since licht she first saw on the banks o' the Maine.

The bypast was a' that stern fortune had left hir,
Its oft-trodden pathways hir thoughts liked tae roam,
Conversin' wae freens o' which death had bereft hir,
E'er sorrow had entered or paupered hir home.

The last o' a race in whase lang generation
Were medals for honesty second tae none;
Their ledger was free frae the least deviation,
Tho' rewarded by fortune wae only a bone.



There watchfu' she sat till hir gleeed o' a fire,
Past faces familiar its embers did take;
Parents, guid man, an' bairns, in the picture gaed by hir,
While employer an' patron went on in its wake.

The auld village kirk, a wee sacret biggin,
In midst o' the heedstane an' moss-covered tomb,
Gaed by in the pride o' its straw-theekit riggin
Whar sourocks an' chickenweed smuggle their bloom.

What mair met hir gaze we may lee tae conjecture,
Why need we step in whar the angels wad tread?
Resigned tae the will o' man's surest protector,
Morn lit the wee cot, but its inmate was dead.

There close tae its ashes crouched all that was mortal
O' hir wha life's trials cud never mak sour
The wun whustled cauld through the chinks o' its portal,
An' seemed for tae whisper – God pity the poor.



The short day o' winter, wae storm clouds o'er cast,
Had entered its name in the roll o' the past;
The sun near the south wae his thumb on the latch,
Made the sparrow an' robin creep under the thatch.

The whaup an' the gull turned their heads tae the lake,
An' the kye wauchled hame tae their strae in the stake;
The crows flew in flocks tae the plantin's cauld shade,
Whun wat, sair, an' weary, Joe shuthered his spade,

An' turned tae his cot, a bit yin-story biggin,
Wae shows for its thatch, green scraws for its riggin;
Though his claes wur attendit wae mony a vent,
Kind nature endowed him wae wealth o' content.

Hie wife's cheerie smile an' his bairns' laughin' craw
Aye acted supreme tae drive canker awa;
Nae stools o' repentance were seen near his hab,
As truth wus the waft that he wove in life's wab.



He luck't doon on pride and on vain pretence,
As he watch't them show aff before people o' sense;
Wae deceit, their twin brither, low, sordid, an' vile,
An' he lauch't at them a' wae a humorous smile.

He saw how ambition wae self as its friend,
Had withered an' sank oot o' sight in the end;
As the leaves o' the plantin', when simmer's awa,
Are trod in the mire, so pride gets a fa'.

He watch't for the man, or the woman as well,
Wha'd think o' their neighbour as weel as theirsel',
Or cloak a bit faut, an' no add tae the same;
But few earned the title, or got sic a name.

He wished for the time whun grim falsehood wud cease,
Whun the world's Supreme Premier wud brek through its lease;
He spoke tae his bairns tae keep truth in their sicht,
As life begun maistly ended in richt.



Hear me ye nymphs sae aften seen
Frae Hillmount House tae Lowpark Green,
Shud ever beauty want a queen
Its throne tae share,
In safety we may lift our e'en
An' crown hir there.

I aften think in these oor days
We're rether heedless in oor ways;
Why shud we crouch wae face like slaes,
As sour as sin,
When doors wide open tae oor praise
Invite us in.

Alang thy banks, my native steam,
Aft hae I joined the dreamer's dream,
An' yet mehtinks we only seem
Tae look an' run;
Weel micht we praise thee, ream on ream,
An' no' hae done.



Oerhangin' bough an' gnarled oak
Has lang in silent language spoke
Tae ilk daft cheel whase neb wad poke
Where brammels thrang,
Until the latent spell is broke
In rustic sang.

When time's pitch pipe is set for June
An' blossoms nod a' roun' an' roun',
Wha wudna joy in notin' doon
A' it contains,
Or join the spirit liftin' tune
O' nature's weans?

The workman tae may cock his crest,
An' twist the fethers roon his nest,
Since men like "Fraser" can arrest
The doonward swirl
O' trade an' commerce, east an' west,
An' gar it birl.

I ne'er was gaen tae spinnin' rhyme
In praise o' rich folk o' oor time,
An' yet the coof ne'er saw a stime
Ayount his shanks,
That wudna glower wae joyous skime
Alang thy banks.

Whar men like Frazer, Young, an'
Houghton,
Disdain tae hug their gear when gotten,
Their cash account wull ne'er be rotten
While labour wields
Its wand ower flax an' hemp an' cotton,
Alang oor fields.

'Tis men like these that pluck the sting
Frae discontent's unreasoning,
An' gars the lowly hallan ring
Tae want unknown;
Ambition too may hae its fling
An' minor throne.

Then let us ban dishonour's sway,
While yet we prosper in the way;
'Tis only as we truth display
We may attain
Tae life's unclouded summer day,
By Braid or Maine.



My auld candlestick, as you sit by the wa',
You mind me o' those who are lang syne awa,
O' happy young faces wha wove late at nicht,
As they put oot their wabs by the aid o' your licht,
And got them laid up for the hall the next day,
Our bread tae procure and our rents for tae pay ;
While John thocht nae ill o't his wab-bag tae pack,
And start for the market wi' three on his back.
But noo times are changed, for the poorest of a',
When gaun tae the toon wonna travel ava',
Tae keep fashion up, though their last pence be taen,
They maun hae a ticket and sail in the train;
Betimes when we venture tae travel abroad,
The cars o' the poster are thick on the road,
Wi' their big lades o' folk oot and in tae the toon,
That wud pay for their seat though the charge be a croon.



Noo, my auld candlestick, though your needed nae mair,
The bare thocht o' partin' ye makes my heart sair,
When I think o' the time ye gaen licht tae the wheels,
And assisted the wee yin that carried the queels.
Oor weans were then wi' us frae big tae the wee,
The joy and delight o' their daddy and me;
Their noise and their laughter, diversion and sang,
Made work tae us licht as the time wore along;
But as time stole awa', tae us troubles came,
Oor boys tuck the notion o' leeing their hame,
And pushing their fortune far ower the wave,
Some of them succeeded, but some got a grave,
How yin by yin followed the pick and the wale
Yon stane in God's Acre can tell oot the tale.
O, soun' be their sleep 'neath the burial sod!
In the great resurrection they'll shine wae their God.

THE
INSTRUMENTAL
MUSIC
QUESTION

Come, Jamey, lad, pou oot your fork,
An' gee your throat a clear.
Select a tune, a' gang at work
Far frae uncanny fear:
Nae organ's help you need expect'
Although your lungs be crackin',
Oor zeal has fairly broke its neck,
Its keys tae pot we're packin'
In bits this day.

'Twad be a shame, you'll safely grant,
For us, as leadin' men,
Tae dunt life's pad indifferent,
An' no' our voices len'
Tae stem the cloud o' sinfu' breath
That's blawn across oor Zion,
Whase notes infernal smack o' death
In spite o' a' oor sighin'
An' prayer this day.

Shame fa' the lad wad introduce
The organ's deevin' help,
As safely turn oor morals loose,
An' list the fiddle's yelp;
Or place the holy water crock
Whar priests can freely tack her,
An' cleanly wash the sinfu' flock
Who dares tae praise their Maker
On strings this day.

What wad oor Scottish Fathers think,
Wha knee-deep stud in snaw,
An skirl'd their praise wae upturnt blink
Behint some dike or wa',
If now a glimpse they cud but get
O' church an' pew an' steeple?
We fear the term, backslidden set,
Wad fa' upon the people
Wha leeve this day.

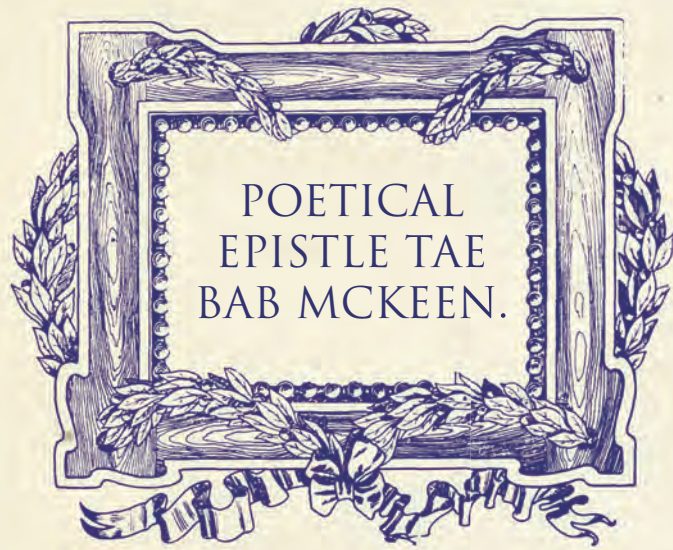


I doubtna but some yins may hae
Got ears supremely strung,
Wharby hey ken an ass's bray
Frae strains divinely sung;
'Tis sich as these wha breed the deuce,
An' term us Bulls o' Bashan,
Because we shake oor voices loose
Withoot respect tae fashion
On ony day

In days gane by ilk hearer sung
Oor tunes wae a' his micht,
An' in them notes an' graces flung
Whune'er he thocht it richt;
For new notations now they rave,
Which only spoil oor singers;
They wunna use the ancient stave
Nor mack yin o' their fingers
Ava this day.

They say King Davey blew the fife
Whun worl'y cares wud come;
While ithers swear by daith an' life
He aften bate the drum.
But if the poet king was mad,
An' left a wrang example,
Are we tae follow sickna pad,
Defamin' God's ain temple
On earth this day?

We ken o' bodies wha wad spae
The harp o' Faughanvale
Will land in First Broughshane some day
Wae bagpipes at its tail;
For yon wee toun ye needna fear,
The help is no' yet left her,
Its clergy want nae bagpipes here,
Nor harps in the hereafter,
By nicht or day.



Noo craps are rushin' through the soil,
An' Nature wears her bonniest smile,
While hardroucht honest sons o' toil,
 Wi' sunburnt face,
Are busy in the fields the while,
 Wi' rapid pace.

Tae them the cuckoo's double cry
Sounds sweet among the trees hard by,
The lark wi' ootstretched wings on high
 The day begins,
Till straicht he draps wi' wakrife eye
 Among the whins.

The wee bit bee 'mang shamrock bums,
Till wi' its lade awa' it hums;
The corncrakes pipe when gloamin' comes,
 An' work is still;
The harp o' slumberin' echo thumbs
 Along the hill.



I needna write o' birds tae thee,
Wha likes them a' as weel as me;
But man, alive! if you cud see
 The warmth an' fervour
That's noo in everbody's e'e
 About th' "Observer".

For when the paper is brought in,
The wee yins for my specks will rin,
An' young an' auld shut up their din
 Without a hint,
Until they ask wi' eager grin,
 Has Bab oucht in't ?

My blessings on your auld steel pen,
The lad that guides it seems tae ken
The wye tae please his fellow men,
 The hale concern.
May health an' happiness atten'
 Your trips tae Larne.



THE FIRST SWALLOW

An' so ye're back wi' yer coat sleek as ony,
Its tail like oor evening dress split doon the en' ;
Yer een like twa diamond stars twinklin' sae bonnie,
Aye mak' ye at hame tho' ye flit noo an' then.

Ye'll mind hoo last year 'neath the bennermost rafter,
The clabber ye stuck up in nebfu's sae wee;
Ye'll also remember that very soon after
Ye skirrl't at the looks o' the pussie an' me.

The needfu' wee throughban' sae narrowly soucht for,
Ye mixt wi' the mortar tae keep it in shape;
The bite for the wee yins ye idently wroucht for,
An fill't ilka mou' as it upward did gape.

Hoo anxious oor watch lest some tripper or harrow
A clear pad shud lee for the pussie tae tak';
A maraudin' excursion 'mang wren's wane or sparrow,
But especially yours in a string on the bauck.



Yet whun the daisy its red fringe was showin',
An' beauty gaun gyte frae the bloom o' the pea,
Yer sang frae the riggin' seem't – “Let us be going,
Your spring days wull fade, but they're lastin' wi' me.”

Then biddin' fareweel tae ilk hamely surroundin',
Hoo quickly ye mobilized under a wheen;
At the word o' advance it was fairly astoundin'
Tae witness yer flight frae oor wee isle sae green.

Noo as yer'e got hame, won't ye tell me a story –
What news frae the Pyrenees, Italy or Spain?
Wull auld Britain suffer hir ancient-day glory
Tae dwine at the blink o' a Kruger or Steyn?

The wee birdie flapp't its blue wing on the cipple,
Disdain roon its bricht e'e at yinst did appear;
Wi' men like George White, be they soople or cripple,
For Hearth, Queen and Sireland dinna ye fear.

Then takin' a look o' his auld habitation,
Sae clearly suggestive – neglect has its sting;
He turn't him awa frae the cares o' the nation,
Intent on observin' the dictates o' Spring.



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