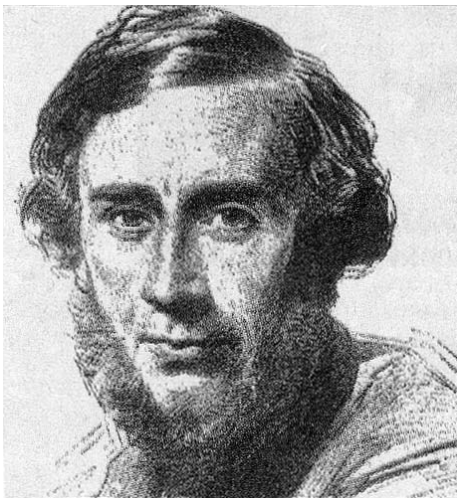


*Two forgotten  
poems  
by  
John Tyndall  
(1841)*



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It has been noted that some writers referred to John Tyndall as “the poet of science,” such was the nature of his prose. But the fact that in his youth he actually wrote poetry has remained obscured, although his poems were published in his local newspaper, *The Carlow Sentinel*, in the later quarter of 1841, while he was working in Youghal and Kinsale (Co. Cork) for the Ordnance Survey. He himself, when sending his second batch of poems to the editors, used as an excuse “the success of my previous experiment,” that is to say, his first two poems, which are presented below. As he was writing for a local paper, he used a pseudonym, “W.S.” to conceal his identity, which was reasonable in this case since the poems were of a political nature, and Carlow was in the middle of an election campaign.

In presenting two forgotten poems by the Carlow physicist John Tyndall (1820-1893) to a general readership we are aware that this could scarcely be justified on their literary value alone. It could be said, nonetheless, that they work moderately well as poems, and that they clearly reveal a taste for words—for their meaning and sound—and a good classical education. Beyond that, the interest of the poems is mainly historic, serving to illumine two areas of Tyndall studies; they reveal his unusual cultural roots among the rural Irish Protestant tenantry, and how the fundamental lines of his own future intellectual and even his scientific work were, in an embryonic form, already there in the early 1840s, with all the parts visible in place as budding limbs are in the early embryo.

The poems were found in the process of reviewing Friday’s Catalogue of the Correspondence of John Tyndall in search of material for the accompanying paper on Tyndall’s Carlow family. A reference was found in a letter to his father about poems that he had published in the *Carlow Sentinel* in October. A more detailed search of the newspaper produced six poems, of which two were unknown to the Database of John Tyndall’s Correspondence based in York University (Toronto, Canada). The poems were titled *Landlord and Tenant* and *The Battle of the Constitution is to be fought at the Registry*. A preliminary edition of the text, but preserving the punctuation as found, with comments to guide the reader to appreciate their aesthetic and biographical value, are the objects of this paper.

# THE POEMS

## *Landlord and Tenant*

“Look on this picture - and on this”

### I

Nature had burst night's trammels, and the sun—  
 From the rich glowing portals of the East—  
 Had shed a flood of radiance on the plains.  
 The accident had sent its zephyr forth  
 To pour the perfume of the mountain flower  
 In sweet abandon to the infant day.  
 From every budding petal trembling hung  
 A diamond dew-drop like the glistening tear  
 That lingers in the bright beauty of brilliant eye;  
 While her fair cheek is dimpled by a smile,  
 The earliest ray had woo'd me from my couch  
 To watch the rosy wing of morning flap  
 The murky shades of gaitly away;  
 I stood upon a verdant hill, and waxed  
 On nature's chessboard which before me lay,  
 In varying beauty spread—the infant ear  
 Had burnt his emerald shroud and flimsily  
 Shrank from the balmy breeze's bland caress.  
 The meadow spread its carpet to the sun,  
 On which the brightest gems in Flora's crown,  
 Like topaz blushed—on the horizon's verge,  
 In far perspective azure mountains rose,  
 Bathing their peaks in ether—rapt I stood,  
 And viewed the lovely scene—the immortal mind  
 Expanded, and sought converse with the skies.  
 Acknowledging the goodness infinite,  
 I bowed before creation's God, and mine !  
 A hoary occupier of the soil  
 Approached the flower-crown'd hillock where I stood  
 I marked his placid eye—the impetuous fire  
 Which burned there once was dimmed—and in its place  
 A calm and holy glow lit up its cheek.  
 Full seventy winter on his furrowed brow  
 Had spent their vehemence—yet smiling sat  
 Contentment there as lingers day's last beam,  
 In peaceful radiance on the rugged cliff.  
 And in my kindest accents bade—“good morning”—  
 The customary salutation passed—  
 The weather was our theme, from that anon  
 The smiling scene which lay before our eyes.

“ See,” said the patriarch, “where yon distant wreath  
 “ Of sapphire smoke, upon the mountain air,  
 “ Is borne sunward—where the sheltering trees  
 “ Preclude alike the sunbeam and the blast.  
 “ There is my home—within the selfsame shade  
 “ The boyhood of my father's father passed;  
 “ Beneath a towering time which widely throws  
 “ Its bear-clad arms round, --the good old man

“ Resigned, his breath—his son has also trod,  
 “ Full twenty years ago, the darksome vale.  
 “ The hoary scion of this most revered stock,  
 “ I, till the spot, “here once its foliage bloomed ;  
 “ My daughters portioned off, a hardy son  
 “ Remained with me—the incense of whose prayer  
 “ Ascends with mine to heaven's high throne, and calls  
 “ Who gave us all—when upon blight fell,  
 “ When whirlwinds premature have wildly swept  
 “ Across earth's bosom, laying waste our fields  
 “ With desolating power—meagre and chill  
 “ Gaunt poverty has scowled upon our hearth ;  
 “ His smile benignant ever has dispelled  
 “ The sable shades which gathered round my soul !  
 “ When from life's tendril, like the blighted leaf,  
 “ I trembling hang—in prayer my dying tongue  
 “ Shall falter feebly froth ‘God bless my Landlord.’ “

### II

The parting ray of the autumnal sun  
 Was slumbering on each ivy mantle pile  
 Which crowned in hoary grandeur every hill.  
 I neared my home —anticipation cast  
 The shroud of time aside - each playmate dear  
 Before me smiling stood, and breathed a welcome ;  
 How sweet the thought – the kind, the warm embrace  
 Absorbed reflection – happy, happy youth !  
 Ideal time, when an utopian wing  
 Sweet fancy gaily soars on air ambrosial ;  
 Alas! that item reality should crush  
 Thy visionary towers –I reached my home  
 And eyes that once beamed kindly passed me by  
 Unheedingly –dark strife had raised her flag  
 Where kindred hearts had throbbled in unison.

One smiling morn, by inclination led,  
 I wandered forth reflecting as I went  
 On bygone days –There is a peaceful spot  
 (thought I) where discord has not raised its head ;  
 I'll to't and view fair happiness once more.  
 I climbed a hill and from its mossy peak  
 I viewed that scene –no smoky curl  
 Danced on the eddies of the atmosphere.  
 Onward I went towards the happy spot  
 --for so I deemed it still—no sound arose  
 To wake the sleeping echoes of the shade ;  
 Each tree appeared to weep, as from the bough  
 The leaflets seared and severed dropped to earth ;  
 A sad foreboding filled my anxious mind  
 When what I sought now burst upon my slew !  
 Black, desolate and dreary –roofless walls  
 Upreared themselves, on which each passing breeze  
 Lavished a sigh—fixed to the spot I stood  
 And traced the work of ruin's ruthless hand.

Upon a rugged stile a being sat ;  
 He seemed inanimate—as if his mind  
 Abstracted from the earth, had wondered from  
 Its tenement, which waited its return.  
 His forehead pale was by a grisly hand

Intensely pressed.— I , wondering, asked the cause  
 Of all I saw.—He started at my voice,  
 And like a reckless maniac answered—“THERE!”  
 “ The darkest shroud is cast o’er all my hopes ;  
 “ THERE have I lived in happiness—and THERE  
 “ My aged father heaved his dying sigh ;  
 “ I see his angry ghost indignant frown  
 “ Upon his guilty son—Oh! Here I might  
 “ Have spent a happy life, wer’t not for ONE !  
 “ Damn h’m, ye furies !—on the guilty thing  
 “ Heap burning coals, and oh, ye veng-ful skies  
 “ Rain back perdition on his lonely grave !  
 “ Oh ! I could the darksome thoughts which now revolve  
 “ Within my tortured mind, be quick enrobed  
 “ In hottest flame !—and were my burning breast  
 “ A thunder-cloud to roll the lightning on—  
 “ In dire explosion, on the miscreant’s head,  
 “ I’d showered the vengeance of a ruined man !  
 “ Curst be the hour he came with silver tongue,  
 “ And Syren sounds to woo me to my doom !  
 “ To suit my taste a bauble first he dressed,  
 “ And called it “Freedom”— God! I’ve found it false !  
 “ False as the fruit that blooms in Hell’s abyss !  
 “ He talked of pampered tyranny—--he said  
 “ I was a slave—and I, poor fool, believed.  
 “ Miseries, till then unknown, sprung up before  
 “ My jaundiced view—--imaginary wrongs  
 “ Lent fuel to the furnace of my brain.  
 “ And viper-like, I turned and madly stung  
 “ (Oh ! base ingratitude,) the man that fed me.  
 “ ‘I was done !—He cast the reptile from his breast—  
 “ Deserted by the fiend who worked my woe—  
 “ A wretched houseless wanderer I roam.”

The Battle of the Constitution is  
 to be fought at the Registry

Child of the North:- the fairest scene for thee  
 The native mountain’s wild sublimity  
 Which proudly from their kindred clouds look down,  
 White snows eternal firm their dazzling crown,  
 Thou lov’st to see the foaming Geyser rise,  
 Bounding from earth in mingle with the skies ;  
 And tho’ the truant feet may widely roam,  
 Thy fondest thoughts still linger round thy home.  
 Thus, Carlow, thus—wherever my lot may be,  
 Fond mem’ry clings tenaciously to thee !  
 Hail ! thou theme of wide-spread story,  
 Well and bravely hast thou done ;  
 Snatched the mead of dreadful glory.  
 “IRELAND’S BATTLE” fought and won !  
 Shall the harp of Erin slumber  
 On the Oak—a silent thing ?  
 Wake, Oh wake ! the tuneful number,  
 Strike! Oh strike ! the golden string !  
 When carpet lords ignobly hung  
 On ladies eyes from day to day,  
 Thy gallant son—the fearless “ONE”\*

Pronounced the fiat—“Serfs away!”  
 The icy shackles of the tomb  
 Of ten years growth are burst, and now ;  
 A ray from heav’n dispels the gloom  
 Which darkened o’er the nation’s brow.  
 Old sated gaze, and shrill and clear  
 Her thrilling pebroch then did blaw,  
 And hoary Lomond stooped to hear  
 The joyous notes of Whigs awa’!  
 When once the conquering eagle rose,  
 With purple wing above the slain,  
 As havock sheathed his reeking sword,  
 Upon Pharsalia’s bloody plain.  
 Did Caesar linger ? Shadowy bands  
 Of crimson Munda, is it so?  
 Resounding o’er her arid lands,  
 The voice of Sybia answers ; ‘No.’  
 Men of Carlow ! Now’s the time ;  
 Rush to the embattled walls,  
 Writhing in his filthy slime  
 Crush the Hydra as she sprawls !  
 Onward ! spirits of the free  
 Join the glorious Spartan band ;  
 Let your thrilling watchword be;  
 BRUEN and our native land!’

\*O’Connell gives him this honour.

#### COMMENTS

On Landlord and Tenant. This poem was published in the Carlow Sentinel on 11 (first part) and 18 December 1841. The Carlow Sentinel and Leinster Agricultural, Literary and Commercial Advertiser was a large-format, four-page weekly which Tyndall read regularly in his period in Youghal and Kinsale (Co. Cork). The paper published at least one poem every week, on the top right corner of page 4, except for the last quarter of that year, when the lists of voters took that place. In addition, sometimes a second poem was printed on the lower central columns of page 3, the position occupied by all of Tyndall’s poetic contributions. This prominent position was given to these poems, perhaps, because they made reference—as distinct from the more conventional poems on page 4—to then current political affairs. At that time in 1841 Carlow was in the throes of a divisive election campaign.

Tyndall’s poems were signed “W.S.” which, as his correspondence reveals, was John Tyndall’s shorthand for “Walter Snooks,” a sobriquet that he used from time to time but that could, in this author’s opinion, be meant also as a belated reference to the nationalist Romanticism of Sir Walter Scott as a source of inspiration. In the last term of that year another four poems by W.S. were carried by the paper.

The poem does not follow any regular traditional form. Meter and rhyme are irregular, but there are two stylistic devices which lend music to the poem; one is a scattering of internal rhyme, mostly minor, and the other, very frequent alliterations (“balmy breeze’s bland caress,” “a diamond dew-drop” or “falter feebly forth,” for instance). There are three voices in the poem;

a man who is re-visiting the home he left long time ago, which is obviously self-referential, and two local characters; these are not, as the title would suggest, a landlord and his tenant, but rather, a lucky tenant and an unlucky one, as both refer to their landlord in dramatically different ways. Although their religion is not explicitly stated, one, happy and industrious, is the Protestant tenant. He is not free from natural disaster such as weather and blight, but he is able to fight them, or at least, he is contented with his lot, his home having stood for generations. “God bless my Landlord” are his parting words. The other, wretched, would appear to be the Catholic tenant, now homeless, the home where he spent a happy childhood and where his father died, and where “I might have spent a happy life” destroyed, through the landlord’s deceit, “A wretched houseless wanderer I roam” is the summary of his statement, but not without suggesting that in this case, these were “imaginary wrongs.” Tyndall does not make a moral judgement between the two, as to whether one was good and the other wasn’t. It was his unique experience having lived and having befriended real people on both camps, so he simply acknowledged their different forms of existence; the first, not blaming God, the second, putting the blame for all his sorrows at the gate of the landlord.

A dramatic effect is achieved by contrasting the respective surrounding landscapes, which are intensely observed, with the causes of the misfortunes of the two tenants. The visitor meets the two characters with different expectations; the happy tenant is “the hoary scion of this revered stock,” the unhappy tenant in his present dispossession, “a reckless maniac.”

Ostensibly the poem is a political statement, compressed in the last words from the lucky tenant; “God bless my Landlord.” But in view of Tyndall’s later life, the poem could be considered rather as a foreword to his scientific creativity, which is present there as in embryonic form. And he who delighted in speculation about the origin of scientific creativity, would probably have taken pleasure in seeing his later interests stated so early and so clearly by himself. However, it would seem that he did not go back often to his youthful poems as expressing the root-cause of his work, perhaps because they were a bit of an embarrassment, the work of an still orthodox believer, an attitude that he was later to renounce for the sake of science.

It is curious that to approach both scenes the visitor in the poem “climbs” a hill to gain a view. Leighlin stands beneath the Killeshin Ridge with magnificent views to the Blackstair Mountains.

Subjects that would concern the natural philosopher and the scientist in later life are already present here, when he is just twenty years of age and has had no formal instruction in the natural sciences. So, he starts with the keyword “Nature,” which is really the main but unstated character in the poem. “Radiance,” as in solar radiance or even body heat, appears twice, and this was to become one of his major subjects later, linked with spectroscopy, or with the effect of solar radiation when finding gases in its path. “Absorbed reflection” seems to be an early attempt to describe a physical phenomenon related to body heat—the warmth felt in the embrace—which is, after all, radiation of some form, bodily perceived. He already takes “accident” or chance as the source of natural causality, although

the world is “God-given.” To watch the nearly Homeric “rosy wing of morning flap” and the poetically incongruous but scientifically daring “mountain peaks bathing in ether” became very productive exercises for the physicist, although at this point he could not have acquired the experience of ice and snow which would necessitate Alpine altitudes. “Reality should crush thy towering vision” would suggest a sound principle of the contemplative of nature before the speculations of the harried academic that needs to explain his existence through his scientific output.

On The Battle of the Constitution is to be Fought at the Registry. The poem appeared in The Carlow Sentinel on 27 November. The poem was addressed to the “child of the North,” a specific sector of the voting population of Carlow. In particular, the last line reveals that the poem is to rally Bruen’s supporters. Thus the military guise of the later part of the poem is appropriate because Henry Bruen was a Captain in the British Army, as well as a Magistrate in Carlow, the largest landowner in the county, with about 16,500 acres of land, with four large houses, in Carlow, Dublin and London, and after the election, Representative for the County in Parliament, together with Thomas Bunbury. Tyndall quickly moves into the metaphor of the mountains and the snow—which were much closer to him in Cork where he wrote than in Carlow where the poem was read, which is situated in a large plain where mention of mountains is metaphorical—a device to separate the superior from the inferior, or to put it bluntly, Protestant from Catholic. The reference to the geyser, with its intermittent upwellings of hot water, would appear to be out of place, unless it is meant to be a symbol for the Ascendancy, but this in a short poem of a bellicose nature only contributes to confuse the issue. The lines “And tho’ the truant feet may widely roam/Thy fondest thoughts still linger round thy home./Thus, Carlow, thus—wherever my lot may be/Fond mem’ry clings tenaciously to thee ! “/ are an original description of the nostalgia of the forced emigrant for the home left behind, although their role in the poem is unclear, and can be seen as an untimely intrusion of the self. “Thy gallant son” is obviously one confronting O’Connell, but this is made clear using a singularly unpoetic procedure, a footnote. At the end of the poem we learn that this is Bruen, one of the local landlords that was politically involved and who ran for election in Carlow against O’Connell and the Catholics. Pibroch or Pibroch is a form of music of the Scottish Highlands. For those in the know, the poem attempts to equate the election campaign then under way in Carlow with famous classic battlefields; Pharsalia, where Julius Cesar defeated Pompei (48BC), and Munda (Southern Spain) where Cesar obtained the decisive victory that put an end to the Civil War (45 BC). Sparta was prominent militarily in Greece around 500BC.

In my opinion this poem works less well than Landlord and Tenant for two reasons; first, the link between the title of the poem and the text is less obvious in this case, and second, because the author mixes too many emotions in a short space. The word “Registry” in the title does not recur or is further explained or alluded to. In brief the poem means; in the election the registry (or the ballot box, in current parlance) could be to us Protestants what Pharsalia was to Cesar, an important victory. When we read “Ireland’s battle fought and won,” we are

projecting the future on to the past, while in the classic allusions, the past is projected into the future, to the confusion of the reader. With regard to the mixed emotions; the poem is a statement of tribal identity and superiority, a battle cry, the nostalgia of the emigrant for home, and a survey of Cesar's military victories, all laced with a sharp observation of the landscape. The hydra, being a microscopic organism, might perhaps be described as slimy, but hardly as fearsome, and would have been unknown to most people. Medusa, hydra's larger sister, would have done more appropriately. The fact that the poem is explicitly an ode to Captain Bruen's military prowess very likely helped to have it published.

In brief, the poems were successful locally at the time because they expressed a local tribal situation, taking sides in a relatively sophisticated way, which could go over the head of ignorant readers. You needed to read between the lines and have an element of sensitivity and classic education to grasp them. Still more briefly, you needed to be Protestant to enjoy them. But it was precisely for those reasons, their local and temporary value, that their appeal was not universal, that they were not great poetry, and that they were forgotten. The use of a pseudonym probably helped to erase them from memory.

#### From Kinsale to Alp Lusen

The only Tyndall poem that has attracted critical attention is his mature *A morning on Alp Lusen*, which Tyndall signed in his own name. There are many versions of this poem but we include the one that was published in *New Fragments*. When read immediately after the youthful poems we are struck by the idea that this is a more serious, more universal, and so more far-reaching work of poetry, where Tyndall deals with a bigger issue, the very possibility of true knowledge. It would seem that Tyndall began working towards this poem already in 1872, about twenty years before its final publication, a fact which attracted Francis O'Gorman to study the nature of the textual variations in search of the evolution of Tyndall's own ideas. O'Gorman observed that throughout the editorial process, Tyndall appears gradually to lose confidence in evolution as an explanation of his own aesthetic experiences in the Alps. More recently, a study of *Alp Lusen* has formed a chapter in Daniel Brown's study of *The poetry of Victorian Science*, from the viewpoint of the reactions Tyndall elicited in the circle of *The Red Lion*, which included Maxwell, Tait, Thompson and other Scottish scholars.

Both parts of *Landlord and Tenant*, which came out separately, as well as *The Battle and Alp Lusen*, begin with a look upwards, to the sun, the sky or the mountain peaks. This is an initial search for energy, for the source, which is the object of the whole poem. In all cases the landscape is read minutely, it is interrogated as to its works and origin. Some stylistic features remain unchanged from the early to the latter poems; the abundance of internal minor rhymes ("rounded mounds," "green ... streams," "marigolds ... knolls" "heath ... leaves," "paints against" etc.) and a near absence of consonant rhymes at the end of lines. The foot is still irregular and so is the meter. Light and colour, temperature and sound were constant cues recurring in all poems, and some times their messages are interchanged

in what Brown appropriately calls synaesthesia. When Tyndall tells us that "each particular blade trembles in song" he would seem to be invoking the Impressionists' attitude to light, perhaps van Gogh in particular, who observed the plants in the landscape leaf by leaf, and who stood still in the open air to feel the sun on his skin.

By the time *Alp Lusen* was finally printed, Tyndall had been exposed to poetic, aesthetic, religious, philosophical and scientific influences from many quarters, so it is truly remarkable that after such deluge the youth poems—virgin of the influence of the Alps, Carlyle, Darwin, Faraday, Forbes, Lange, Lucretius, the X Club and so many others, in brief, a purer Tyndall—still echo so strongly, both in the form and in the ideas, fifty years later, suggesting that there is, as it were, within the intellectual life of the author, and perhaps of all authors, a principle of conservation of cultural momentum that Tyndall would have relished to enunciate.

#### A MORNING ON ALP LUSGEN

The sun has cleared the peaks and quenched the flush  
Of orient crimson with excess of light.  
The tall grass quivers in the rhythmic air  
Without a sound ; yet each particular blade  
Trembles in song, had we but ears to hear.  
The hot rays smite us, but a quickening breeze  
Keeps languor far away. Unslumbering,  
The soul enlarged takes in the mighty scene.  
The plummet from this height must sink afar  
To reach yon rounded mounds which seem so small.  
They shrink in the embrace of vaster forms,  
Though, placed amid the pomp of Cumbrian Fells,  
These hillock crests would overtop them all.  
Steep fall the meadows to the vale in slopes  
Of freshest green, scarred by the humming streams,  
And flecked by spaces of primeval pine.

Unplanted groves ! whose pristine seeds, they say,  
Were sown amid the flames of nascent stars  
—How came ye thence and hither ? Whence the craft  
Which shook these gentian atoms into form,  
And dyed the flower with azure deeper far  
Than that of heaven itself on days serene ?  
What built these marigolds? What clothed these knolls  
With fiery whortle leaves ? What gave the heath  
Its purple bloom—the Alpine rose its glow ?

Shew us the power which fills each tuft of grass  
With sentient swarms ? — the art transcending thought,  
"Which paints against the canvas of the eye  
These crests sublime and pure, and then transmutes  
The picture into worship ? Science dumb  
Oh babbling Gnostic ! cease to beat the air.  
We yearn, and grope, and guess, but cannot know.

Low down, the yellow shingle of the Ehone  
Hems in the scampering stream, which loops the sands  
In islands manifold. Beyond, a town,  
Whose burnished domes flash back the solar blaze  
—Proud domes for town so small ! But here erewhile

Unfurled itself the Jesuit oriflamme,  
 And souls were nurtured in the tonic creed  
 Of Loyola. Grand creed ! if only true.  
 Oh ! sorrowing shade of him, who preached through life  
 Obedience to the Highest ! could men find  
 That Highest much were clear ! Yon tonsured monk  
 Will face the flames obedient to a power  
 Which he deems highest, but which you deem damned.  
 Cut by a gorge, the vale beyond the town  
 Breaks into squares of yellow and of green  
 —Of rye and meadow. Through them winds the road  
 Which opened to the hosts of conquering France  
 Lombardian plains—sky-touching Simplon Pass  
 —Flanked by the Lion Mountain to the left,  
 While to the right the mighty Fletschorn lifts  
 A beetling brow, and spreads abroad its snows.  
 Dom, Cervin—Weissshorn of the dazzling crown—  
 Ye splendours of the Alps ! Can earth elsewhere  
 Bring forth a rival ? Not the Indian chain,  
 Though shouldered higher o'er the standard sea,  
 Can front the eye with more majestic forms.  
 From one vast brain yon noble highway came;  
 ' Let it be made,' he said, and it was done.  
 In one vast brain was born the motive power  
 Which swept whole armies over heights unsealed,  
 And poured them, living cataracts, on the South.  
 Or was it force of faith—faith warranted  
 By antecedent deeds, that nerved these hosts

And made Napoleon's name a thunderbolt ?  
 What is its value now ? This man was called  
 ' A mortal God ! ' Oh, shade before invoked,  
 You spoke of Might and Right ; and many a shaft  
 Barbed with the sneer, ' He preaches force—brute force,  
 ' Has rattled on your shield. But well you knew  
 Might, to be Might, must base itself on Right,  
 Or vanish evanescent as the deeds  
 Of France's Emperor. Reflect on this,  
 Ye temporary darlings of the crowd.  
 To-day ye may have peans in your ears;  
 To-morrow ye lie rotten, if your work\*  
 Lack that true core which gives to Right and Might  
 One meaning in the end.

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Where are they now?  
 The gates and railings that once adorned  
 the road boundary of the Carlow Infirmary  
 that stood on the site of the present  
 Sacred Heart Home.