

**THE INALIENABLE
HERITAGE AND
OTHER POEMS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649761265

The inalienable heritage and other poems by Emily Lawless

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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EMILY LAWLESS

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THE INALIENABLE HERITAGE

AND OTHER POEMS

BY

EMILY LAWLESS, LITT.D.

AUTHOR OF "WITH THE WILD GEUSE," ETC.

WITH A PREFACE BY

EDITH SICHEL

PRIVATELY PRINTED

1914

Copies of this book are being sold by Truslove and Hanson,
Sloane Street, and at 153, Oxford Street, and by Messrs.
Bumpus, 350, Oxford Street.

PREFACE

EMILY LAWLESS was, before all else, a poet and a seeker after truth—and in her the two were one. Before all else, also, an Irish poet. There have been few women-poets of creative force in any nation—none in Ireland before her, whose fame has endured. And for Ireland she stands, in verse and in prose. In history, in romance, in "Hurrish" and in "Grania," in "Essex in Ireland" and "With the Wild Geese," she is part of Ireland's past and of its present. She is haunted by the strange bewitching surge of the waves of the Atlantic, of the Western waves "wild with all regret." For her the rolling brown stretches of bog and of peat-moss, with the blue smoke hanging low over them, and their carpet of faithful little peat-flowers, mean home, the enchanted home we all know, where we have played in childhood and felt the first thrills of youth; the moist silver sky, the solitary, ageless stone crosses, the ruined churches, the hovels, the sad, shining lakes make the country where her spirit dwells. It was to Irish Nature that her memory kept returning in the last years of pain and illness when her body could no longer revisit the shores for which she longed. Pictures of the well-known landscapes were always passing before her vision, clear and consoling to the end. Irish Nature was the Nature she knew best, and it inspired the last songs she gave us so gallantly, on the brink of death.

And Irish Nature was to her the symbol of all Nature, that Nature through which alone she faced mystery and found the Highest. She had in her poetry, as in herself, a twofold relation to Nature. There was the external aspect; the physical tie by which she became part of the earth and its teeming life; which made her in younger years adore movement—the rush through the air on a horse, the cleaving of the waves as she swam; which made her also a passionate naturalist, a moth-hunter who knew under which tree-root the grey moths lived, or where to stop the boat upon the sea and dredge for creatures unknown

even to the fishermen, or again, and more intimately, where there grew some humble lichen or rock-bloom, the search for which took days of patient adventure.

And then there was the inward relation to Nature, the wisdom and comfort she drew from it to heal the distressful mystery of life; the evidence she found in it of man's spirit, of a power, however baffled, which transcends material forces. She held to the brave companionship between Nature and the intellect—to those questionings and half-answers and silences which spur it onwards towards the unknown, towards "the untravelled land, where roams that stubborn bedouin man's soul."

Such are her three unfailing sources of inspiration—the visible pagan Nature of the senses, and the search into Nature which means science, and the search concerning Nature which means thought. All three sources prove her a poet rather intellectual than emotional, but tense, sincere and beautifully lucid. None knew better than she that true imagination is never vague, that true vision is more definite than chairs and tables, that memorable poetry is never blurred.

There is another region of her poetic art. It is one in which her intellect yields; in which she is simple and instructive and entirely Irish. When she writes her ballads and tells stories with a swing, a lilt, a sorrowful march-music of her own, she finds, perhaps, her most native self. The ballad of "Fontenoy," already almost a classic, the still more haunting "Dirge of the Munster Forest" vibrate with real life, move from within, transmit colour. Children can love them as well as critics. And to these will now be added the poem in this volume of verses which the poet herself liked the best of them: "The Third Trumpet," the tale of the girl who went at the risk of her life to fetch the proscribed priest to come to her dying mother, and of the old priest who came at still greater peril. To this power of not only telling but of implying a story, we also owe others among these new poems—in the "Eighteenth Century Echoes," less tragic, but swift in their interest and admirable in their compression, full of the same gifts that made their author a novelist of dramatic force and of virile directness.

Form was not Miss Lawless's strong point, that is when she sought it. When it found her, it was perfect, as in some of these poems in

"From the Burren," verses of intuition. And certain metres that she loved she could master, like that of Meredith's "Love in the Valley," most musically followed in "Wide is the Shannon," and in "A Bog-filled Valley."

But in the poems of thought the verse is often but the scabbard for the finely tempered blade of the idea, and, as a rule, she needs the high pressure of a story to mould the rhythm for her. When we come to language, it is a different matter. Her words are always strong, melodious, distinguished, sometimes inspired, and the lines in one of her poems sound the unmistakable note of autobiography.

Who can say
 On what poor, spent, and quite unhonoured brain
 The pearly treasure of one spacious phrase,
 Eight matchless words, worthy our dearest Keats,
 May now and then alight, glow for a space,
 And vanish, scarcely recognised while there,
 And quite unguessed of by our sapient crowd?
 At all events I who now speak to you
 Would gladly—should some gracious power deign
 (Say once or twice perchance in sixty years)
 To make me the recipient of like gift,
 And claim the promise—gladly would I vow
 Here on my oath no mortal save myself
 Should see, hear, aye or catch a rumour of it.

And Emily Lawless would have been capable of keeping that vow. The sincere love of poetry is a very purifying affection; her devotion to what was big made her big, and she showed a large humility where poetry was concerned—both in the way she accepted criticism from any one who cared, however insignificant, and in the modest place that she assigned to herself among singers. Notwithstanding, now and again she caught that "spacious phrase." There are words, fragments, that run in our heads and make us wonder from which great poet they come, until we remember they are hers. They generally recall the Elizabethans, and the verse of the Elizabethans it was whose poetry most affected and most influenced her.

In one way these last poems have an especial distinction. They bear the marks of her struggle with bodily misery and marks of the victory she won. They are scarred, but they prove the final dominance of her mind. And although her lyrics of sleeplessness and suffering, such as "Night-Sounds" and "Resurgence," haunt the hearer with their poignant weariness, their waking nightmares, yet they bear in them a note of endurance which may well strengthen others in like stress; and a better note—the conviction of that deeper truth wrested from illness which the strong man misses. Few poets have sung about pain, and fewer still without preaching. To have done this is characteristic of Miss Lawless.

The best of her work will not perish with the "vanished argosies, and all the flotsam of unthrifty Time."¹ And it is to be hoped that one day her poems will be collected and given to the world together: those from "With the Wild Geese," and those from "The Point of View," the little volume printed for the benefit of the Galway fishermen, which contains so much of her intimate thought; as well as these latest songs which she herself desired should be privately published. She had just finished revising them when the pen dropped from her hand.

EDITH SICHEL.

¹ "The Point of View" ("Of the Value of Masterpieces").