

**A SELECTION
FROM THE POEMS**

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A Selection from the Poems by George John Romanes

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GEORGE JOHN ROMANES

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FROM THE POEMS**

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POEMS
OF 6065-1
GEORGE JOHN ROMANES

M.A., LL.D., F.R.S.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
by
T. HERBERT WARREN
President of Magdalen College, Oxford

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TO
FRANCIS TURNER PALGRAVE

*in memory of his interest in the following poems
and of his affectionate regard and respect
for the writer*

INTRODUCTION

IT was among the wishes of my friend Mr. George John Romanes that a selection from his poems should be published, and Mrs. Romanes has asked me to help her in making the selection and to write a few words by way of introduction. Neither office is easy. The work of many writers is an artistic creation which may be understood and treated quite apart from the creator. That is not the case with my friend's poems. He left a considerable body of them. All had grown naturally out of his everyday life, and are in a sense autobiographical. It follows that to illustrate his life almost every poem is of equal importance, and also that the true key to each and all of them is nothing less than the man himself. The best introduction, then, will be found in the 'Life and Letters'¹ which Mrs. Romanes has put together and given to the world. To that work this little volume is a sort of note or supplement, the poems here selected being intended to indicate rather than represent

¹ *Life and Letters of George John Romanes* (Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1896). The chief reference to the poems is contained in pp. 228 *et seq.*, where two very interesting and laudatory letters will be found, one from Mr. Gladstone, and the other from the late Dean Church.

an aspect of the man without which his portrait and the record of his many-sided sympathies are incomplete, and to give in his own language some illustrations of the tenour and history of his interests and his thought.

George John Romanes was born on May 20, 1848. His father was a scholar and divine, being a Doctor of Divinity and professor of Greek at Kingston, in Canada. He may, then, have inherited a gift for language. He did not, however, himself receive any very strict education, and in particular seems to have had little or no definite grammatical or stylistic training. Nature as seen at home and in foreign travel, especially during a prolonged residence at Heidelberg, and later on in sport in Scotland, music and religion, these were the influences under which his early years were spent. At nineteen he passed to Cambridge. Here religion and natural science in turn dominated him and strove for the final mastery. His Burney Prize Essay on the subject of 'Christian Prayer and General Laws,' as has happened in the case of not a few students afterwards distinguished—a fact which is the best defence of these prizes—was at once the exercise and the proof of the main bent of his mind and genius.

He left Cambridge a thinker, a writer, and a natural investigator. Fortunate in the possession of independent means, he was able to pursue his researches and his meditations with the stimulus of the scientific circle of University College, London, and also in the solitude and seclusion of his own retreat and laboratory

at Dunskaith, in Ross-shire. '*Carmina secessum scribentis et otia quaerunt.*' It was here that the impulse and the inspiration to attempt verse-writing first came to him, the most felt and potent influence upon his whole nature at this time being undoubtedly the close friendship to which he was admitted by Mr. Charles Darwin.

His writing poetry seems to have begun about the time that he made Mr. Darwin's acquaintance. He published a few poems anonymously in magazines not long after this time, but the first to which he put his name, the most ambitious he ever wrote, was his Memorial Poem composed for the occasion of Mr. Darwin's death.

The second landmark or epoch in his verse-writing was, so Mrs. Romanes tells me, the death of another friend, in 1886.¹ After this he wrote much more frequently. In 1890 he moved from London to Oxford, and the remaining years of his life, except in so far as they were broken by travel in pursuit of health, were mainly spent there. In this his Oxford period his poetry seems to enter into a new phase both of feeling and form.

That a man of science should also be a poet is not, or at any rate ought not to be, extraordinary, any more than that a poet should be in some sense a man of science. For the two characters to be united in anything like perfection is, however, in modern times certainly

¹ Cf. *Life and Letters*, pp. 178, 179.

rare, although there is, as all know, the famous instance of Goethe. The differentiation of function and specialisation of effort increasingly necessary in the modern world render this natural. In earlier times, when natural knowledge, so far as it existed, was mainly a matter of common general observation with the inductions or intuitions to which it gave rise, natural philosophy was closely allied to and often or usually uttered itself in poetry. Notwithstanding their famous feud with poetry, the early Greek philosophers were as often as not poets themselves, while Lucretius, one of the most poetical, is also the most truly scientific mind of Rome, not a mere collector or cataloguer, like Pliny, but a man of scientific observation, attitude, and reasoning. Of so-called didactic poems, on scientific subjects, the ancient world of course offers many examples, and in imitation of the ancient world our own literature also, down to the end of the last century, had plenty of them, among the last and not the least being the once famous and famously parodied 'Loves of the Plants' of Dr. Darwin. In this century such compositions have fallen out of fashion. Natural science has gone beyond them. The exact detail which it requires is fatal to poetry. But it does not follow that a poet may not have a scientific mind or a man of science a poetic one, much less that the poet may not also conduct investigations or the man of science write poetry on the topics on which poetry is usually written.

Lord Tennyson has shown again and again, in