

## BJÖRNSSON AND HIS WORK.

THIS little volume<sup>1</sup> is the only systematic study which has yet appeared in English of the work of this famous Norwegian poet, novelist and dramatist. It has been rewritten from a thoughtful appreciative paper which appeared in 1902 in commemoration of Björnsson's seventieth birthday. Dr. Payne emphasizes the nationalism of Björnsson in spite of the message he bore to the intellect and conscience of the world at large. His earliest work *Synnöve Solbakken* which was written in the twenty-fifth year of his life, opened a new era in Norwegian letters which up to this time had not been independent of the Danish capital where all Scandinavian literary tradition had hitherto centered.

Björnsson was born at Kvikne, December 8, 1832, the son of a country pastor who six years later removed to Romsdal, one of the most picturesque regions of Norway. The impression made upon the boy's sensitive nature by these surroundings was deep and enduring. He received his secondary education in a famous school at Christiania, where Ibsen was attending at the same time. He entered the university in his twentieth year, but his student career was not a brilliant one. He was too much occupied with his own intellectual interests to make a model pupil. One of his first attempts at literary work after leaving the university was a juvenile drama, *Valborg*, which was accepted by the theater. The result, however, was remarkable; for, having been given a complimentary ticket of admission, the young playwright made such good use of it that his eyes were opened to the defects of his own accepted work, and he withdrew it before it came to be presented.

The next fifteen years were richly productive. "Thus at the age of forty," says Dr. Payne, "Björnsson found himself with a dozen books to his credit, books which had stirred his fellow countrymen as no other books had ever stirred them, arousing them to the full

<sup>1</sup> *Björnstjerne Björnsson (1832-1910)*. By William Morton Payne. Chicago: McClurg, 1910. Pp. 98.

consciousness of their own nature and of its roots in their own heroic past."

One of the first of these was "Arne," which is familiar to English readers and in which is found a beautiful lyric which expresses the poet's feeling of awe and longing in the presence of his native mountains. Some of its stanzas read as follows in Dr. Payne's English:

"Often I wonder what there may be  
Over the lofty mountains.  
Here the snow is all I see,  
Spread at the foot of the dark green tree;  
Sadly I often ponder,  
Would I were over yonder.

"The apple-tree, whose thoughts ne'er fly  
Over the lofty mountains,  
Leaves, when the summer days draw nigh,  
Patiently waits for the time when high  
The birds in its boughs shall be swinging,  
Yet will know not what they are singing.

"He who has yearned so long to go  
Over the lofty mountains—  
He whose visions and fond hopes grow  
Dim, with the years that so restless flow—  
Knows what the birds are singing,  
Glad in the tree-tops swinging.

"Oh, shall I never, never go  
Over the lofty mountains!  
Must all my thoughts and wishes so  
Held in these walls of ice and snow  
Here be imprisoned forever?  
Till death shall I flee them never?

"One day, I know, shall my soul free roam  
Over the lofty mountains.  
Oh, my God, fair is thy home,  
Ajar is the door for all who come;  
Guard it for me yet longer,  
Till my soul through striving grows stronger."

Björnson is perhaps best known to English readers through his tales of peasant life in which he may really be said to have discovered the Norwegian peasant for literary purposes. Another sense in which Björnson may be considered particularly nationalistic is in his use of the wealth of the traditional literature of the Scandinavians. The ancient sagas of the Norsemen helped him greatly

in his delineation of the peasant character, and he wrote five saga dramas of which the trilogy Sigurd Slembe is one of the noblest masterpieces of modern literature. Though written in prose with the exception of a prologue in blank verse, the drama is interspersed with several lyrics one of which Dr. Payne has admirably translated in the original meter.

“Sin and Death, at break of day,  
Day, day,  
Spoke together with bated breath;  
‘Marry thee, sister, that I may stay,  
Stay, stay,  
In thy house,’ quoth Death.

“Death laughed aloud when Sin was wed,  
Wed, wed,  
And danced on the bridal day:  
But bore that night from the bridal bed,  
Bed, bed,  
The groom in a shroud away.

“Death came to her sister at break of day,  
Day, day,  
And Sin drew a weary breath;  
‘He whom thou lovest is mine for aye,  
Aye, aye,  
Mine he is,’ quoth Death.”

“The volume of lyrics [published in 1870] includes many pieces of imperfect quality and slight value,—personal tributes and occasional productions,—but it includes also those national songs that every Norwegian knows by heart, that are sung upon all national occasions by the author’s friends and foes alike, and that have made him the greatest of Norway’s lyric poets. No translation can ever quite reproduce their cadence or their feeling; they illustrate the one aspect of Björnsson’s manysided genius that must be taken on trust by those who cannot read his language. A friend once asked him upon what occasion he had felt most fully the joy of being a poet. His reply was as follows: ‘It was when a party from the Right in Christiania came to my house and smashed all my windows. For when they had finished their assault, and were starting home again, they felt that they had to sing something, and so they began to sing, “Yes, we love this land of ours”—they couldn’t help it. They had to sing the song of the man they had attacked.’ Into this collection were gathered the lyrics scattered through the peasant tales and the

saga dramas, thus making it completely representative of his quality as a singer."

At the end of the fifteen years above referred to, Björnson's poetic impulse seemed to be almost exhausted, but the world could not foresee the 35 years of splendid activity for which he was preparing in the few intervening years of silence. The transformation in literary manner and choice of subjects from national lyrics and saga dramas to novels and plays of modern life, began when he sent home from abroad the two plays "The Editor" and "A Bankruptcy." Fourteen plays and seven volumes of prose fiction represent this later period, and during the greater part of the time their author was also an active influence in the political and social press and platform of his country. Of his modern dramas perhaps his greatest is "The King," while his two great novels are "Flags Are Flying in City and Harbor" and "In God's Ways." From this last book Dr. Payne selects a passage which he thinks best typifies Björnson's message to mankind. It consists of a sermon preached by a clergyman on the Sunday following the certainty of his child's recovery. In this he states that it is life, not faith, which is the first concern of man. The little book closes with a few characteristic anecdotes of the poet's irresponsibility in details, and impulsive temper. Björnson died in Paris which had been his winter residence for a number of years. "The news of his death occasioned demonstrations of grief not only in his own country, but also throughout the civilized world. Every honor that a nation can bestow upon its illustrious dead was decreed him by King and Storthing; a warship was dispatched to bear his remains to Christiania, and the pomp and circumstance of a state funeral acclaimed the sense of the nation's loss."