

Charles Joseph Kickham 1828-1882

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CHARLES JOSEPH Kickham "journalist, novelist, poet but, before all, patriot," (the words are John O'Leary's) was born 150 years ago, on May 1, 1828. A fine Celtic cross marks his grave behind St. Michael's church in Mullinahone, Co. Tipperary. As children, we often strolled the churchyard and lingered by that cross to read O'Leary's epitaph. Scarcely a quarter century had elapsed since the body of the great Fenian leader had been laid to rest in his beloved village. He had spent most of his life in the family home in Fethard Street and was still affectionately remembered by many people in the parish. Denny Shee, the reputed prototype of one of the characters in Kickham's best known novel, "Knocknagow," was hale and hearty in his saddler's shop on the Square. Bill Bolger, the tailor, frequent companion of Kickham's walks, still was plying his trade. There were few in that place who could not sing or recite "The Irish Peasant Girl," "Patrick Sheehan," or "Carrigmo-clear," to name only a few of Kickham's stirring ballads.

Young Charles attended James Fox's Classical School in the village. His parents' plans that he would study medicine had to be abandoned because of an accident which occurred in his 13th or 14th year. A spark from the kitchen fire caused a powder flask he was drying to explode, permanently impairing his sight and hearing. Despite this disability, his youth was a happy one. There were many gatherings of young friends; there was fishing in the Anner or the King's River, fowling in Ballylanigan bog or the Polloughs, hurling matches, fairs with sugar-stick stalls, trick-o'-the-loop men and "cheap Johns." There was leisure too for reading and for first efforts in prose and verse.

Kickham's family owned a prosperous drapery shop but the sensitive youth could not fail to be conscious of the harsh realities of life around him and to become involved in efforts to alleviate them. He thrilled to the impassioned patriotic verse of Thomas Davis, which appeared in the Nation, the organ of the Young Ireland movement. From his bedroom window he could see the ruined abbey on which the head of a United Irishman was impaled in '98. O'Connell's Repeal movement was sweeping

the country and young Charles ran with his first shilling "to repeal the Union." Later, he was to recall having seen cornfields laden with golden grain at the time that, following the failure of the potato crop, famine stalked the land.

By the time he was twenty, Kickham had committed himself to the national struggle. He was one of the leaders of the Mullinahone "brigade" that rallied to the support of Smith O'Brien's abortive '48 Rising. He became active in the Tenant Rights League; when that movement failed he abandoned hope in the success of legal agitation. John O'Mahony visited Ireland in 1860 and administered the Fenian oath to his young kinsman who threw himself vigorously into the work of the movement. When James Stephens founded the Irish People newspaper in 1863 Kickham became one of the editorial writers. There was an informer in the office of the paper. It was raided in September 1865. Kickham was arrested in November, tried for treason-felony, convicted, and sentenced to 15 years' penal servitude. His frail health rapidly deteriorated in the English convict prisons where he was confined and he was released in a little over three years.

Back in Mullinahone, his health and spirits responded to loving hearts and familiar scenes—a glimpse of his beloved Slievenamon, his little nieces at play in the garden among budding shrubs and spring flowers. He took up his pen to write his novel, "Knocknagow." Despite its absence of plot and technical defects it has become a classic—having gone through about 36 impressions since it was first published in book form in 1873. The sub-title, "The Homes of Tipperary" was well chosen, for Kickham described life as he experienced it in the village of Mullinahone and the surrounding countryside, the life of men and women whose joys and sorrows he shared.

Kickham's earlier novel, "Sally Cavanagh," was published as a serial in 1864 and issued in book form in 1869. "For the Old Land" was published posthumously in 1886. Kickham also wrote a short novel, "The Eagle of Garryroe," a tale of '98, which appeared originally as a serial and was not published in book form until 1920. The early short stories which Kickham had contributed to the Irish Harp and other periodicals were collected by William Murphy and published in book form in 1920 under the title, "Tales of Tipperary." The Talbot Press reissued "Eagle" and the "Tales" in one volume in 1963. Yeats admired Kickham's ballads and included "Patrick Sheehan" and "The Irish Peasant Girl" in an anthology.

Kickham's sterling character, his invincible courage and fidelity inspired respect in all who knew him and deep affection in many. In private life the militant journalist was gentle and retiring, a lover of children, delighting in the companionship of his friends and neighbours and in the bounty of nature. He was deeply touched by suffering, by the fate of the young emigrant girl, "the lily of the mountain foot that withered far away," by the tragic life of the patriot poet, Edward Walsh. His pen was at the service of victims of injustice; the stirring ballad, "Patrick Sheehan," was written to arouse public concern for the fate of the poor evicted countryman who, having joined the English army as a last resort, was blinded in action, discharged with a miserable pension and jailed for begging in a Dublin street. Kickham's love of his native land was equalled only by his loyalty and attachment to the faith of his fathers, and of his many trials perhaps the greatest was the prohibition of the Sacraments to him for many years. Happily as the result of his personal appeal to Archbishop Croke, that prohibition was removed some years before his death.

Kickham spent the last years of his life in Blackrock, Co. Dublin, where he died. But, in mind and heart he never left the countryside he had immortalized in prose and verse. He came back in death to rest there, near the winding roads, the brown bogland, the gentle river, the fertile fields stretching away to the purple crescent of the hills, in sight of the "mountain" that dominated his thought and his work—old Slievenamon of legendary fame. There, in the quiet churchyard, children may still linger to read John O'Leary's epitaph and, on the marble slab atop the grave, the sonnet in which his young friend, Rose Kavanagh, paid tribute to one "who suffered, sang and died as nobly as he lived."



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