

Sidney Lanier

by

Edwin Mims

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Introduction

The author of the introduction to the first complete edition of Sidney Lanier's poems -- published three years after the poet's death -- predicted with confidence that Lanier would "take his final rank with the first princes of American song." Anticipating the appearance of this volume, one of the best of recent lyric poets, who had been Lanier's fellow prisoner during the Civil War, prophesied that "his name to the ends of the earth would go." Indeed, there was a sense of surprise to those who had read only the 1877 edition of Lanier's poems, when his poems were collected in an adequate and worthy edition. Since that time the space devoted to him in histories of American literature has increased from ten or twelve lines to as many pages -- an indication at once of popular interest and of an increasing number of scholars and critics who have recognized the value of his work. His growing fame found a notable expression when his picture appeared in the frontispiece of the standard American Anthology, along with those of Poe, Walt Whitman, and the five recognized New England poets.

It cannot be said, however, that Lanier's rank as a poet -- even in American, to say nothing of English literature -- is yet fixed. He is a very uneven writer, and his defects are glaring. Some of the best American critics -- men who have a right to speak with authority -- shake their heads in disapproval at what they call the Lanier cult. Abroad he has had no vogue, as have Emerson and Poe and Walt Whitman. The enthusiastic praise of the "Spectator" has been more than balanced by the indifference of some English critics and the sarcasm of others. Mme. Blanc's article in the "Revue des Deux Mondes", setting forth the charm of his personality and the excellence of his poetry, met with little response in France. In view of this divergence of opinion among critics, it may be doubted if the time has yet come for anything approaching a final valuation of Lanier's work. In the later pages of this book an attempt will be made to give a reasonably balanced and critical study of his actual achievement in poetry and criticism.

Certainly those who have at heart the interest of American poetry cannot but wage a feud with death for taking away one who had just begun his career. The words of the great English threnodies over the premature death of men of genius come involuntarily to one who realizes what the death of Lanier meant. It is true that he lived fourteen years longer than Keats and ten years longer than Shelley, and that he was as old as Poe when he died; but it must be remembered that, so far as his artistic work was concerned, the period from 1861 to 1873 was largely one of arrested development. He is one of the inheritors of unfulfilled renown, not simply because he died young, but because what he had done and what he had planned to do gave promise of a much better and more enduring work. Such men as he and Keats must be judged, to be sure, by their actual achievement; but there will always attach to their names the glory of the unfulfilled life, a fame out of all proportion to the work accomplished. Poe had completed his work: limited in its range, it is all but perfect. Lanier, with his reverence for science, his appreciation of scholarship, his fine feeling for music, and withal his love of nature and of man, had laid broad the foundation for a great poet's career. The man who, at so early an age and in the face of such great obstacles, wrote the "Marshes of Glynn" and the "Science of English Verse",

and who in addition thereto gave evidence of constant growth and of self-criticism, would undoubtedly have achieved much worthier things in the future.

Of one thing there can be no doubt, that his personality is one of the rarest and finest we have yet had in America, and that his life was one of the most heroic recorded in the annals of men. The time has passed for emphasizing unduly the pathos of Lanier's life. He was not a sorrowful man, nor was his life a sad one. His untimely and all but tragic death following a life of suffering and poverty, the appeals made by admirers in behalf of the poet's family, a few letters written to friends explaining his seeming negligence, and a fragment or two found in his papers after death, have been sometimes treated without their proper perspective. A complete reading of his letters -- published and unpublished -- and of his writings, combined with the reminiscences of his friends in Baltimore, Macon, and elsewhere, will convince any one of the essential vigor and buoyancy of his nature. He would have resented the expression "poor Lanier", with as much emphasis as did Lamb the condescending epithet used by Coleridge. He was ever a fighter, and he won many triumphs. He had the power of meeting all oppositions and managing them, emerging into "a large blue heaven of moral width and delight."

He was a sufferer from disease, but even in the midst of its grip upon him he maintained his composure, cheerfulness, and unflinching good humor. He had remarkable powers of recuperation. Writing to his father from San Antonio in 1872, he said: "I feel to-day as if I had been a dry leathery carcass of a man into whom some one had pumped strong currents of fresh blood, of abounding life, and of vigorous strength. I cannot remember when I have felt so crisp, so springy, and so gloriously unconscious of lungs." During these intervals of good health he was mentally alert, -- a prodigious worker, feeling "an immortal and unconquerable toughness of fibre" in the strings of his heart. There was something more than the cheerfulness that attends the disease to which he was subject. There was an ardor, an exuberance that comes only from "a lordly, large compass of soul." As to his poverty, it must be said that few poets were ever so girt about with sympathetic relatives and friends, and few men ever knew how to meet poverty so bravely. He fretted at times over the irresponsiveness of the public to his work, but not so much as did his friends, to whom he was constantly speaking or writing words of encouragement and hope. Criticism taught him "to lift his heart absolutely above all expectation save that which finds its fulfillment in the large consciousness of faithful devotion to the highest ideals in art." "This enables me," he said, "to work in tranquillity." He knew that he was fighting the battle which every artist of his type had had to fight since time began. In his intellectual life he passed through a period of storm and stress, when he felt "the twist and cross of life", but he emerged into a state where belief overmasters doubt and he knew that he knew. He was cheerful in the presence of death, which he held off for eight years by sheer force of will; at last, when he had wrested from time enough to show what manner of man he was, he drank down the stirrup-cup "right smilingly".

Looked at from every possible standpoint, it may be seen that none of these obstacles could subdue his hopeful and buoyant spirit. "He was the most cheerful man I ever knew," said Richard Malcolm Johnston. Ex-President Gilman expressed the feeling of

those who knew the poet intimately when he said, "I have heard a lady say that if he took his place in a crowded horse-car, an exhilarating atmosphere seemed to be introduced by his breezy ways. . . . He always preserved his sweetness of disposition, his cheerfulness, his courtesy, his industry, his hope, his ambition. . . . Like a true knight errant, never disheartened by difficulty, never despondent in the face of dangers, always brave, full of resources, confident of ultimate triumph." The student at Johns Hopkins University who knew him best said: "No strain of physical wear or suffering, no pressure of worldly fret, no amount of dealing with what are called 'the hard facts of experience', could stiffen or dampen or deaden the inborn exuberance of his nature, which escaped incessantly into a realm of beauty, of wonder, of joy, and of hope." Certainly the great bulk of his published lectures and his poems bear out this impression. His brother, Mr. Clifford Lanier, says that he would not publish some of his early poems because they were not hale and hearty, "breathing of sanity, hope, betterment, aspiration." "Those are the best poets," said Lanier himself, "who keep down these cloudy sorrow songs and wait until some light comes to gild them with comfort." And this he did.

Lanier, whose career has been here briefly suggested, makes his appeal to various types of men and women. Enjoying the use of the Peabody Library and living in the atmosphere of a newly created university, he gave evidence of the modern scholar's zest for original research; and in addition thereto displayed a spiritual attitude to literature that is rare. The professional musician sees in him one of the advance guard of native-born Americans who have achieved success in some one field of musical endeavor, while a constantly increasing public, intent upon musical culture, finds in his letters and essays an expression of the deeper meaning of music and penetrative interpretations of the modern orchestra. Lanier influenced to some extent the minor poets of his era: who knows but that in some era of creative art -- which let us hope is not far off -- his subtle investigations and experiments in the domain where music and verse converge may prove the starting point of some greater poet's work? To the South, with which he was identified by birth and temperament, and in whose tremendous upheaval he bore a heroic part, the cosmopolitanism and modernness of his mind should be a constant protest against those things that have hindered her in the past and an incentive in that brilliant future to which she now so steadfastly and surely moves. To all men everywhere who care for whatsoever things are excellent and lovely and of good report his life is a priceless heritage.

Ancestry and Boyhood

Sidney Lanier was born in Macon, Ga., February 3, 1842. His parents, Robert Sampson Lanier and Mary J. Anderson, were at that time living in a small cottage on High street, the father a struggling young lawyer, and the mother a woman of much thrift and piety. There were on both sides traditions of gentility which went back to the older States of Virginia and North Carolina, and in the case of the Laniers to southern France and England. Lanier became very much interested in the study of his genealogy. He was convinced by evidence gathered from the many widely scattered branches of the family that a single family of Laniers originally lived in France, and that the fact of the name alone might with perfect security be taken as a proof of kinship. On account of their nomadic habits, due to their continual movement from place to place during two hundred years, he found it difficult to make out a complete family history. He was not, nor have his relatives and later investigators been, able to find material for the study of the Laniers in their original home. At one time he expressed a wish that President Hayes would appoint him consul to southern France. Certainly he was at home there in imagination and spirit from the time when as a boy he felt the fascination of Froissart's "Chronicles".

One of the keenest pleasures he had in later life was to discover in the Peabody Library at Baltimore a full record of the Lanier family in England. In investigating the state of art in Elizabeth's time he came across in Walpole's "Anecdotes of Painting" references to Jerome and Nicholas Lanier, whose careers he followed with his accustomed zeal and industry through the first-hand sources which the library afforded. There is no more characteristic letter of Lanier's than that written in 1879 to Mr. J. F. D. Lanier, giving the result of this investigation. He there tells the story of ten Laniers who enjoyed the personal favor of four consecutive English monarchs. Jerome Lanier, he believed, had on account of religious persecution fled from France to England during the last quarter of the sixteenth century and "availed himself of his accomplishments in music to secure a place in Queen Elizabeth's household." His son Nicholas Lanier -- "musician, painter, engraver" -- was patronized successively by James I, Charles I, and Charles II, wrote music for the masks of Ben Jonson and Campion and for the lyrics of Herrick, and was the first marshal of a society of musicians organized by Charles I in 1626. He also wrote a cantata called "Hero and Leander". He was the friend of Van Dyck, who painted a portrait of Lanier which attracted the attention of Charles I and eventually led to that painter's accession to the court. He was sent by King Charles to Italy to make purchases for the royal gallery. He and other members of his family lived at Greenwich and were known as amateur artists as well as musicians. After the Restoration five Laniers -- Nicholas, Jerome, Clement, Andrew, and John -- were charter members of an organization of musicians established by the king "to exert their authority for the improvement of the science and the interest of its professors." It was a great pleasure to Sidney Lanier to find in the diary of Pepys many passages telling of his associations with these music-loving Laniers. "Here the best company for musique I ever was in my life," says the quaint old annalist, "and I wish I could live and die in it. . . . I spent the night in an exstasy almost; and having invited them to my house a day or two hence, we broke up."

The study of these distant relatives enjoying the favor of successive English kings must have suggested the contrast of his own life; but he was pleased with the fancy that their musical genius had come to him through heredity, for it confirmed his opinion that "if a man made himself an expert in any particular branch of human activity there would result the strong tendency that a peculiar aptitude towards the same branch would be found among some of his descendants."

Another Lanier in whom he was interested was Sir John Lanier, the story of whose bravery at the battle of the Boyne, in 1690, he first read in Macaulay's "History of England". Lanier's hope and belief that the family would some day be able to fill the intervals satisfactorily connecting Sir John Lanier with the musicians of the court have not been realized, nor has any satisfactory study been made of the coming of the Laniers to America. The best evidence of the connection between the two families is found in a deed recorded in Prince County, Va., May 14, 1728, from Nicholas Lanier to Holmes Boisseau -- the name Nicholas being significant. It is certain that Thomas Lanier, along with a large number of other Huguenots, settled in Virginia in the early years of the eighteenth century at Manakin-town, some twenty miles from Richmond. Some of these Huguenots, notably the Moncures, the Maurys, the Latanes, and the Flournoys, became connected with historic families of Virginia. There was a tradition in the Lanier family as well as in the Washington family, that Thomas Lanier married an aunt of George Washington, but this has been proved to be untrue.* The Laniers were related by marriage to the Washingtons of Surry County. They established themselves in the middle of the eighteenth century in Brunswick and Lunenburg counties of Virginia, as prosperous planters; they did not, however, rank either in dignity or in wealth with the older gentry of Virginia. In a letter written in 1877 Lanier gives in full the various branches of the Lanier family as they separated from this point and went into all parts of the United States. One branch joined the pioneers who went up through Tennessee into Kentucky and thence to Indiana. The most famous of these was Mr. J. F. D. Lanier, who played a prominent part in the development of the railroad system of the West, and at the time of the Civil War had become one of the leading bankers in New York city. He was a financial adviser of President Lincoln, and represented the government abroad in some important transactions. He was of genuine help to Sidney Lanier at critical times in the latter's life. His son, Mr. Charles Lanier, now a banker of New York, was a close friend of the poet, and after his death presented busts of him to Johns Hopkins University and the public library of Macon.

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* 'William and Mary Quarterly', iii, 71-74, 1895 (article by Horace Edwin Hayden); iii, 137-139, October, 1894 (by Moncure D. Conway, with editorial comment); iv, 35-36, July, 1895 (by the editor, Lyon G. Tyler).

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The branch of the Lanier family with which Sidney was connected, moved from Virginia into Rockingham County, N.C. Sampson Lanier was a well-to-do farmer -- a country gentleman, "fond of good horses and fox hounds." Several of his sons went to the newer States of Georgia and Alabama. Of these was Sterling Lanier, the grandfather of the poet,

who lived for a while in Athens, Ga., and was afterwards a hotel-keeper in Macon and Montgomery. By the time of the Civil War he had amassed a considerable fortune. In a letter written in 1844 from Macon we learn that he was an ardent Methodist. His daughters were being educated in the Wesleyan Female College in that city, his son Sidney had sailed recently from Charleston to France, and expected to travel through Sicily, Italy, and other parts of Europe on account of his health. He was giving his younger sons the best education then attainable in Georgia.

His son Robert Sampson Lanier had four years before returned from Randolph-Macon College, Virginia, and was at the time the letter was written beginning the practice of law. He never became a lawyer of the first rank, but he was universally esteemed for his "fine presence", his "social gentleness", and his "persistent habit of methodical industry". "During all of his long and active professional life," says the late Washington Dessau, "he never allowed anything to interfere with his devotion to his calling as a lawyer. No desire for office attracted him; no other business of profit or honor ever diminished for a moment his devotion for his professional duties. In the year 1850 he was admitted to the bar by the Supreme Court of Georgia, and from that period down to the time of his death the name of his firm appears in nearly every volume of the reports, indicating the wide extent of his business. . . . As a lawyer, while not aspiring to be a brilliant advocate, he was a most profound and able reasoner, thoroughly versed and grounded in the knowledge of the common law, well prepared with a knowledge of current decisions and in the learning that grows out of them. . . . In his social intercourse he was a gentleman of the purest and most refined type. . . . At his own home, at the homes of others, in casual meetings, in travel, everywhere, he always exhibited toward those who met him an unbroken front of courtesy, gentleness, and refinement."*

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* `Report of the 11th Annual Meeting of the Georgia Bar Association', Atlanta, 1894.

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He was just such a lawyer as Lanier would have become had he remained in that profession; indeed, son and father were very much alike. The father was a man of "considerable literary acquirements and exquisite taste." He was fond of Shakspeare, Addison, and Sir Walter Scott, having the literary taste of the gentlemen of the old South. The letters written to his son show decided cultivation. They show also that he was in thorough sympathy with his son's intellectual life. The letter written by Lanier to his father from Baltimore in 1873 may lead one to think otherwise. Mr. Lanier was opposed, as were most of the men of his section, to a young man's entering upon a musical or poetic career, but more than two hundred letters written by son to father and many from father to son prove that their relations during the entire career of the poet were unusually close and sympathetic. In the earlier years, Lanier sent his poems to his father, and valued highly his criticism, and in later years he received from him financial aid and counsel.

While Robert Sampson Lanier was at college in Virginia he met Mary Jane Anderson, the daughter of Hezekiah Anderson, a Virginia planter who attained success in the political life of that State. They were married in 1840, and Sidney was their first-born. The poet

thus inherited on his mother's side Scotch-Irish blood, an element in Southern life which has been often underestimated. She proved to be a hard-working woman, caring little for social life, but thoroughly interested in the religious training of her children. Her husband, although nominally a Methodist, was not actively identified with the church, but willingly acquiesced in the somewhat rigid Presbyterian discipline that prevailed in the home. The children -- Sidney, Clifford, and Gertrude -- were taught the strictest tenets of the Calvinistic creed. When Lanier afterwards, in Baltimore, lived a somewhat more liberal life -- both as to creed and conduct -- he wrote: "If the constituents and guardians of my childhood -- those good Presbyterians who believed me a model for the Sunday-school children of all times -- could have witnessed my acts and doings this day, I know not what groans of sorrowful regret would arise in my behalf."

The seriousness of this life was broken, however, on week days. Southern Puritanism differed from the early New England Puritanism in a certain affectionateness and sociability. The mother could play well on the piano, and frequently sang with the children hymns and popular melodies. Between the two brothers there was from the first the most beautiful relation, as throughout the rest of their lives: comrades in boyhood, comrades during the War, comrades in their first literary work, and to the end. On Saturdays they went to "the boys' hunting fields -- happy hunting grounds, redolent of hickory nuts, scaly barks, and rose-blushing, luscious, haw apples. . . . Into these woods, across yon marsh, we plunged every permissible Saturday for a day among doves, blackbirds, robins, plovers, snipes, or rabbits."* Sometimes they enjoyed fishing in the near-by brook or the larger river. The two brothers were devoted to their sister Gertrude, to whom Sidney referred in later years as his "vestal sister, who had, more perfectly than all the men or women of the earth, nay, more perfectly than any star or any dream," represented to him "the simple majesty and the serene purity of the Winged Folk up Yonder."

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* Clifford Lanier, 'The Chautauquan', July, 1895.

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The beauty of this simple home life cannot well be overestimated in its influence on Lanier's later life. He had nothing of the Bohemian in his nature. He was throughout his life fully alive to all human ties, fulfilling every relationship, whether of son, brother, father, husband, or friend. His other relatives -- uncles, aunts, and cousins, -- filled a large place in his early life, especially his mother's brother, Judge Clifford Anderson, who was the law partner of Lanier's father and afterwards Attorney-General of Georgia; and his father's sister, Mrs. Watt, who from much travel and by association with leading men and women of the South brought into Lanier's life the atmosphere of a larger social world than that in which he was born.

Nor did Lanier live apart from the life in Macon. Although in later years he felt strongly the contrast between himself and his environment, he always spoke of his native place with the greatest affection, and it was among Macon people that he found some of his best friends in his adopted city. Its natural beauty appealed to him from the beginning --

the river Ocmulgee, the large forests of oak-trees stretching in every direction, the hills above the city, for which he often yearned, from the plains of Texas, or the flats of Florida, or the crowded streets of Baltimore. The climate was agreeable. Describing this section, Lanier said: "Surely, along that ample stretch of generous soil, where the Appalachian ruggednesses calm themselves into pleasant hills before dying quite away in the seaboard levels, a man can find such temperances of heaven and earth -- enough of struggle with nature to draw out manhood, with enough of bounty to sanction the struggle -- that a more exquisite co-adaptation of all blessed circumstances for man's life need not be sought."*

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* `Music and Poetry', p. 134.

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Macon was the capital of Middle Georgia, the centre of trade for sixty miles around. There was among the citizens an aggressive public spirit, which made it the rival in commercial life of the older cities, Savannah and Augusta; before the War it was a more important city than Atlanta. It was one of the first towns to push the building of railroads; it became "the keystone of the roads grappling with the ocean at the east and with the waters beyond the mountains at the west." The richer planters and merchants lived on the hills above the city -- in their costly mansions with luxuriant flower gardens -- while the professional men and the middle classes lived in the lower part of the city. Social lines were not, however, so sharply drawn here as in cities like Richmond or Charleston. Middle Georgia was perhaps the most democratic section of the South. It was a democracy, it is true, working within the limitations of slavery,* and greatly tempered with the feudal ideas of the older States, but it was a life which gave room for the development of well-marked individual types. There were many Georgia "Crackers" in the surrounding country; they were even recognized more than in other States as part of the social structure. While still a young boy Lanier was delivery clerk in the Macon post-office, and entertained the family at nights by "mimicry of their funny speech." In later life he wrote dialect poems, setting forth the humor of these people, and drew upon their speech for illustrations of philological changes in language.

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* In Macon a great many citizens had no slaves at all, and even those who had them had only a few. In 1850 the white population was 3323, while there were only 2352 slaves. In 1859, when the population had grown to 8000, the proportion was maintained. [Despite this statement by Mr. Mims, if these numbers are correct, it would appear that Macon had a significantly higher percentage of slaves than most areas of the South. -- A. L., 1998.]

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In Macon hospitality was regarded as an indispensable, even sacred duty. Cordiality and kindness in all the ordinary relations of men and women made up for whatever deficiencies there were in art and literature. Professor Le Conte, who lived in Macon during the boyhood of Lanier, speaking of some weeks he spent there during a college vacation, says, "Oh, the boundless hospitality of those times -- a continual round of

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