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A CREEK INDIAN POET

The historical department of the University of the State of Oklahoma has undertaken to assemble and preserve all procurable data concerning the life and writings of the late Alexander Lawrence Posey, the Creek Indian poet, who met an untimely death by drowning in the North Canadian River, near Eufaula, Oklahoma, May 27, 1908, in his efforts to save the life of a companion. Posey was born in the Creek Nation, August 3, 1873. His father was a white man of Scotch-Irish descent, and his mother a pure blood Creek.

Alexander Posey was the only member of any of the Five Civilized Tribes whose poetic gifts were such as to give promise of extraordinary accomplishment. Merely for the love of singing the song that was in his heart, Posey wrote lyrics that are touched with beauty quite beyond the commonplace of his surroundings. There were few to

encourage him, fewer to understand him, and rarely a person of critical ability who was able to penetrate the reserve that marked his personality. Posey spoke the English language and had been educated in a little country academy, yet he was always an Indian at heart. He was timid in the presence of strangers, sensitive to the point of embarrassment in all things that related to his writings, and yielded his friendship only to those who had gained his confidence. His complexion was swarthy, his hair black and glossy, and his eyes brilliant, dark and expressive. His features bore marked resemblance to those of Shelley. His imagination, tinged with the melancholy of his race and his love of nature, tender and romantic, were inheritances from tribal generations that knew all the ways of the wind, the sky and the earth.

Such felicity in versification as Posey possessed was self-taught, and his poems should not be judged by a too exacting standard. That he sang sweetly and understandingly, and that of his people he was the only singer whose poetry may survive their time, should be the merit of his

work. His "Song of the Oktahutchee," celebrating his favorite stream, the North Canadian, which afterwards claimed his drowned body, is an appeal of the forest solitude:

Far, far, far are my silver waters drawn;
The hills embrace me, loth to let me go;
The maidens think me fair to look upon,
And trees lean over, glad to hear me flow.
Thro' field and valley, green because of me,
I wander, wander to the distant sea.

Thro' lonely places and thro' crowded ways,
Thro' noise of strife and thro' the solitude,
And on thro' cloudy days and sunny days,
I journey till I meet, in sisterhood,
The broad Canadian, red with sunset,
Now calm, now raging in a mighty fret!

O'er sandy reaches with rocks and mussel-shells,
Blue over spacious beds of amber sand,
By hanging cliffs, by glens where echo dwells --
Elusive spirit of the shadow-land --
Forever blest and blessing do I go,
A-wid'ning in the morning's roseate glow.

Tho' I sing my song in a minor key,
Broad lands and fair attest the good I do;
Tho' I carry no white sails to the sea,
Towns nestle in the vales I wander thro';
And quails are whistling in the waving grain,
And herds are scattered o'er the verdant plain.

For a number of years Posey was editor of a country newspaper, the Indian Journal, at Eufaula, and in his weekly writings about local events was delightfully humorous -- his humor being of the kind possessed by the fullblood Creek Indian men

to a surprising degree. The Dawes Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes was then dismembering the tribal governments and allotting their lands in severalty. Posey discussed the changing conditions in quaint dialect and so wittily that his "Fus Fixico" letters were widely read and enjoyed. He knew the fullblood to his innermost thought, and keenly felt the melancholy of the old men as they saw the invading white man breaking down the barriers behind which this Indian empire had slumbered since the early 30's. Deeper pathos may hardly be found than in "Hotgun on the Death of Yadeka Harjo":

"Well so," Hothun he say,
"My ol'-time frien', Yadeka Harjo, he
Was died the other day,
An' they was no ol'-timer left but me.

"Hotulk Emathla he
Was go to be good Injin long time 'go,
An' Woxie Harjoche
Been dead ten years or twenty, maybe so.
All had to die at las';
I live long time, but now my days was few;
'For long poke-weeds an' grass
^Be growin' all aroun' my grave-house, too."

Wolf Warrior he listen close,
An' Keno Harjo pay close 'tention, too;
Tookpafka Micco he almos'
Let his pipe go out a time or two.

Posey was a lover of books. Of the prose-

writers he was fondest of Emerson and Thoreau, and the writer remembers a letter from his Creek friend in which Posey announced with boyish delight that finally he had saved enough money to buy standard editions of these sages of Concord. Posey's Merrimack was the Oktahutchee, down which he made many excursions in his boat. His journals of these trips were fragmentary, but contained many exquisite passages. Along the Oktahutchee was a range of hills bearing the Creek name Tulledega, which means "border line." This little poem, "In Tulledega," was Posey's tribute to his craggy friends:

Where mountains lift their heads
To clouds that nestle low;
Where constant beauty spreads
Sublimar scenes below;

Where gray and massive rocks
O'erhang rough heights sublime;
Where awful grandeur mocks
The brush, the poet's rhyme,

We saw the evening blush
Above the rugged range,
We heard the river rush
Far off and faint and strange.

"To the Indian Meadow Lark" is an appreciation of that brave and joyous bird that lives summer and winter in Indian Territory:

When other birds despairing southward fly,
In early autumn-time away;
When all the green leaves of the forest die,
How merry still art thou, and gay.

O! golden-breasted bird of dawn,
Through all the bleak days singing on,
Till winter, wooed a captive by the strain,
Breaks into smiles, and spring is come
again.

Posey's parents lived in the wilderness. Concerning his boyhood, Posey said one day: "I was raised on a farm and was accounted a pretty weedy crop. The cockle-burrs and crab-grass grew all the more prolifically after I had been given a good thrashing. Tom, an orphan boy adopted by my father, was my youth-long companion, and I often look back to the 'days of the lost sunshine,' when we romped in our long shirts, or 'sweeps,' as we called them, which my mother fashioned for our use. These shirts or 'sweeps' were long, flowing garments, made on the order of a tunic, but longer and more dignified. There was a vast freedom in these gowns; freedom for the wind to play in, and they were so easily thrown aside at the 'old swimmin' hole.' We looked forward with regret to the time when we would have to discard them for jeans coats and trousers and copper-toed boots, though these were desirable to chase rabbits in on a snowy day. Those who have never worn "sweeps" have never known half the secrets whispered by

the winds of boyhood."

"My first teacher," continued Posey, "was a dried-up, hard-up, weazen-faced, irritable little fellow, with an appetite that caused the better dishes on my father's table to disappear rapidly. My father picked him up somewhere, and seeing that he had a bookish turn gave him a place in our family as a private teacher. From him I learned the alphabet and to read short sentences, but I never spoke any English until I was compelled to speak it by my father. One evening, when I had blurted out in the best Creek I could command, and began telling him about a horse-hunt, he cut me off shortly: 'Look here, young man, if you don't tell me that in English after supper I am going to wear you out.' I was hungry, but this put an abrupt end to my desire for the good things I had heaped on my plate.

"I got up from the table and made myself useful -- brought water from the well, turned the cows into the pasture -- thinking maybe this would cause him to forget what he had said. My goodness, however, was without avail, for as soon as he came from the table he asked me in a gentle but firm

voice to relate my horse-hunt. Well, he was so pleased with my English that he never afterward allowed me to speak Creek."

Unhappily, Posey died in the early spring-time of his career. He had scarcely felt the thrill of literary ambition. He lived apart from men whose knowledge of his art would have been helpful to his craftsmanship. His little songs were sung as a boy sings in the fields. That the years would have brought him strength and vigor in lyrical expression is the belief of those who knew him. His people are being absorbed into the new social order that surrounds them, and racially it is improbable that another native poet will appear in the Five Civilized Tribes. Posey doubtless felt a premonition of the change that was at hand when he wrote "To a Daffodil":

When Death has shut the blue skies out from me,
Sweet Daffodil,
And years roll on without my memory,
Thou'lt reach thy tender fingers down to mine of
clay,
A true friend still,
Although I'll never know thee till the Judgment
Day.

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