



Reflections

A Selection of Poems
by John Coleman



About John Coleman

John Coleman was born 1855 in Ardboe, County Tyrone, at the far side of Lough Neagh. He married his sweetheart Mary Treanor at the age of 17 in Derrymacash, Lurgan. They went on to have 14 children.

John and Mary lived together in Cove Lodge for the rest of their lives. John died in 1938 and is buried in the graveyard at the Old Cross, Ardboe.

Brought up on the shores of Lough Neagh, John bought Cove Lodge in Ardboe, and farmed for much of his adult life. His poetry is alive with his connection to the land. His life was steeped in traditions, in the Celtic way of living off the land, in community and shared celebrations and sorrows. He writes tales of beautiful summers and harsh winters, and paints pictures of the ever-changing scenery through the seasons. As John gets older (he lived into his 80s) he reminisces of his own childhood and wonders at how much has changed since he was a boy.

Without the benefit of the internet, or as far as we know, travelling far, John is well-read and philosophical. He asks questions and ponders the meaning of life. Death does not seem to scare him, in fact, it is very much part of the circle of life. His faith has been passed down from his mother from an early age, and this comes to his mind more and more as he gets older. All of his life was lived on the shores of Lough Neagh – from the Coleman homestead to Cove Lodge – he was never far from his beloved Lough.

John has written a record of a distant past that survives only through the Celtic tradition of story-telling.

He lost many of his family, friends and neighbours across the Atlantic Ocean.

John Coleman's poetry was first published from 1929 – 1938 in his local weekly paper, The Mid Ulster Mail. The poems have been recovered from the paper's archives and brought together in one book for the first time. The great majority of the poems have not been available to view until now. His thoughts cover the issues of the day and many of the poems are still relevant in to-day's world; especially in Ireland. This project is primarily for the extended Coleman family but as they are enjoyable and educational the poems are now available to be shared with anyone. The subjects covered are his beloved Lough Neagh and Ardboe, Ireland and the Exiles, The Seasons, Memories of Childhood, Religious Thoughts, Life and Death, Commentary of the Day, War and Story Telling.

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Reflections

When the nations war no more,
And the cannon cease to roar,
That left millions in their gore,
We'll have peace.

When that thing we call ambition,
That so often brings contrition,
And has caused so much affliction
And disgrace.

And they spoke of a new world,
With the old in abyss hurled,
And the new one then unfurled
In its place.

Land for heroes, so they said,
Who survived the mounds of dead,
When the rivers all ran red
With their gore.

But those heroes still are waitin'
For that world called the great'un,
But they keep on repeatin'
"Nevermore."

Not better now, but worse,
Is this world that war did curse,
Want of work, an empty purse,
We deplore.

Now in queues we have to stand
To solicit, not demand.
When we should be on the land
As of yore.

Or the shuttle should be guidin',
That we always took a pride in,
And competitors daridin'
Us no more.

But the shuttle's idle now,
And bad prospects for the plough;
Would some wizard tell us how
To restore.

Back to use our trade again,
That was filched across the main
As 'tis useless to complain,
Or implore.

And they send us in the "stuff"

Till we've got more than enough,
And we cannot then rebuff
As we keep an open door.

But we think it very hard,
Our success it does retard,
When we find our exports barred

And we're waitin' and we're waitin'
For that world they called the great'un,
But may still keep on repeatin',
Like the raven, "Nevermore."

4th October 1930.



Wanted – A Contented Man

Some musty old books I have read in my time
That were hidden in nooks in a cupboard of mine
But I would like to get more and read them in peace
For there's something I'm seeking I never could trace
I have read through these books and of many enquired
And I'm searching for more before I get tired
And if I'm successful I will think it well spent
If a man I can find who is always content.

I'll begin with the farmer his work's never done
He is busy from daylight till set of the sun
He is ploughing and sowing and always kept going
And I can assure you his work isn't fun
He is watching the weather and the change of the moon
Or will it keep dry or will rain come on soon
And his boots aren't polished nor walking on flags
And a good many of us are clad in old-rags
And the rent and taxes still bother his mind
Let him borrow or beg it, he'll have it to find
And the wages and stamps are far worse than the rent
So he's always in trouble and he's never content.

The next are the rich who have plenty of stuff
But the more they get, they have never enough

And they're not like the poor, their money's not trash
For if I might say it, their god is their cash.
The stuff that they sell you they say it's so nice
And the quality good and they keep up the price
And they are pinching and scraping and casting accounts
With their eyes on the alert to see the amounts
And if the poor farmers have not got the rent
They will have to pay them and they aren't content
And they're hoarding it by in a safe or the bank
And those who came after will give them small thanks.

I will make a big bound now and jump to the plains
Where the armies are fighting and thousands are slain
The Commander in Chief's there but not at the front
Like Wellington – Bonny that still bore the brunt
He's not in the van but away far behind
Not wielding a sword but employing his mind
He's using the phone and he's all in a sweat
Sending out his dispatches for fear he'd be beat
And he's planning and scheming on victory bent
But will any one tell me that he is content
Well I know he isn't although he is brave
This is getting too long sure all leads to the grave.

(23 April 1927)

Buy British Goods

This world is always moving though to us 'tis not apparent
There are many things in nature of which we have not learned
And we're reading and writing and it does my mind annoy
When I think of all the changes since I was a little boy.

When we went unto a market be the distance near or far
No bicycle to ride upon, no bus, or motorcar
But we started out determined and we somehow managed there
Through suffering from corns as we jogged upon "shank's mare"

Now everything is changing we've the bus the motorcar
The "Fords" came here in thousands from o'er the ocean far
And how oft we hear the slogan nought but "British goods to buy"
And we're bringing from America and do not heed the cry.

(August 3 1929)

Death and the Lady

A lady on a sick bed lay, a lady great and grand,
Whose word was law, none dare say nay, with wealth at her command;
Now stricken down in prime of life, as there she lay in pain,
Death held no terror for her she would soon be well again.
Past pleasures seemed to beckon, as they rose before her view,
She heard companions calling out, "We're waiting here for you."

Lady – But such a strange sensation, it takes away my breath,
Oh! I see an apparition, can that thing there be death?
Whose form is so repulsive, I see it standing there;
It makes my flesh so creepy it looks so gaunt and bare.
Its very bones protruding, seems scarce encased in skin;
Oh such a frightful spectre, oh how did it get in?

Death- Then spoke that apparition- you have guessed my name alright,
Your career on earth has finished, I have come for you to-night;
You have spent your life in pleasure your earthly span has run,
Another world awaits you, are you prepared to come?

Lady – Oh, Death be not so cruel, I am not prepared to go,
Then why such haste to force me, and leave this world below;
I have every pleasure here in life and nothing seems amiss,
I know where I'm going, then wherefore part from this.
And leave this lovely mansion and my pleasures all behind,

Please seek some other victim, to whom fate is not so kind;
And grant me an extension, a longer time I crave,
Extend to me your clemency, oh! I abhor the grave.

Death- I come not here to parley, or grant you a request,
And the grave is not so awesome, 'tis there you'll lie at rest;
If your life has not been evil, you need not grieve for earth,
You'll have nothing to complain of when I take away your breath.

Lady – Oh! Death have some compassion and don't cut me down so soon,
You have passed the old and feeble, and I am in my bloom;
I've everything to live for here, my life's a heaven on earth,
Then why come here to calm it, and take away my breath.
Instead, relieve me of this pain, and let me longer live,
And when this way you come again my life to you I'll give;
Then for the present pass me by, my eyes are wet with crying,
I'm not prepared to go with you, I never thought of dying.

Death- Dear lady you entreat in vain, I cannot grant your prayer,
You think you should on earth remain because you're young and fair;
But I make no distinction, though it may seem unkind,
I delight to take the young away and leave the old behind.

Those earthly things you cherish most, in which you put your trust,
When in the clay will fade away, and all return to dust;
Your youth, your beauty, and your gold, from me will not you save,
And I'll delight to see the old convey you to the grave.

Lady – Oh, Death forbear, and have a care, don't cast that fatal dart,
Replace it in your quiver there, don't aim it at my heart;
There's a secret that I have in store, I can no longer hide,
My plea for mercy don't ignore, I'll soon become a bride.
I beg for mercy, I implore, oh! please your wrath restrain,
And I agree to go with thee when you come round again;
Then grant to me a longer space, I'm far too young to die'
How short has been my earthly race if I must say goodbye
Unto my lover and my friends, my mansion and my gold;
Oh! seek some other victim from the feeble and the old.

Death- In vain dear lady you implore, though it may seem unkind,
Those earthly things that you adore, to leave them all behind;
To choose a victim from the old, consign it to the tomb,
Would not surprise the living like a lady in her bloom.
They see the old and feeble pass, they never think of death,
Until I enter like a thief and take away their breath;
That lover that awaits for you, his bride you'll never be,
To earthly pleasures bid adieu, and come along with me;
I can no longer parley here, I'll cast this fatal dart,
The change that I have forced on thee may be the bitter part.

Lady – Oh! cruel Death withhold that shaft, for a little bide,
I thought you would compassion have on a prospective bride;
But no, you bound me to the grave, you blast me in my bloom,
You leave behind the old and frail, consign me to the tomb.

What numbers have you passed to-day – the old, the maimed, the blind,
Yet singled me out for your prey, and left them all behind;
Your hateful spectre from me part, I'm goaded to the grave.
I c'ose my eyes, and turn my face, to hide your hateful sight,
But oh! how short my earthly race, and must pass to-night.
Farewell to all I love on earth – my friends, my gold, my lover.
I'm forced to part from all by death, from all I love to serve;
To see them never more on earth, from all I'm forced away.
The shaft is sped, the lady's dead, now fodder for the clay.

16 February 1929



Thoughts of the Heart

Oh! Ask us not, it is a theme too sacred to impart,
The meaning of those fitful dreams, the story of the heart,
The cause of all those waking hours that chase away repose;
Oh! Ask us not to tell you what our conscience only knows
When thoughts of long ago arise, aye thoughts that won't forsake
The memory of that long past-time as there we lie awake;
The scenes of long ago come back like a forgotten dream,
Mistakes we made in youthful days of things that might have been,
And we ponder o'er those early years, as there we lie awake,
And we think we have done penance for making that mistake,
We see the prize before our eyes it dangles to be seen,
As there we lie and ponder o'er the things that might have been.
They're gone those youthful comrades, and all their youthful ways,
No more the youthful amours in those far-off happy days;
We need no noonday sun to see, it is no fitful dream,
It seems to us reality the things that might have been.
But we let that chance slip past us it won't come back again;
When that tide went flowing past us we failed to board the stream,
And now the stream is shoaling and among the rocks we lie,
And flounder here like fishes when the water has run dry.
We see the early paths we trod ere noonday suns had shed
Their beams upon our early lives, the wayward paths that led
Us onward through a tangled maze as if our eyes were blind,
To wander in a labyrinth no exit ere to find.

And we gaze upon that picture we have painted in our mind,
And we feel so pessimistic that fate was so unkind,
For we think our lives are wasted and that we'll never die;
Oh no! We'll live forever and that's the reason why
That at fortune we are railing that we're angry at fate,
Because we're poor and humble that we are not high and great;
There's an idol we are seeking whose feet are made of clay
Will we find it? Make a god of it, we'll never pass away.

26 October 1929



REFLECTIONS

The years glide past, maybe the last on earth I will see,
Until, dear Lord, Thou claim'st the life Thou gavest unto me;
I pine not for a longer stay, I thank Thee for the years
Thou gavest me to wend my way from out this vale of tears.
And if the broader way I've trod when morning sun was bright,
Ere downward from meridian height to herald coming night,
May those who trod the narrow path my mediators be,
When hence I part to render up my stewardship to Thee.
The ghosts of all my long past years before my eyes I see,
They're marching past in single file, they seem to beckon me,
They know I'm standing on the verge, how long, dear Lord, how long,
Thou'lt for me care, my faults forbear, before I join the throng?
Those milestones seemed so far apart, old age a myth did seem,
As on my way from day to day life seemed to me a dream;
Now looking back upon that past, how quickly time has fled,
Those years that seemed so far apart have all like phantoms sped.
And now I call the phantoms back, obedient to my whim,
I analyse them one by one, I find my faults, my sin,
I find where often I have err'd, but who will cast the stone,
As here I stand upon the verge, unchampion'd alone?
And try to peer into the haze that hides futurity,
Invested in this mortal coil, a thing that cannot be;
Resigned to wait Thy will, oh Lord, upon the verge I stand,
Until Thou deign'st to call me hence unto that Promised Land.

(24 June 1933)

O'D MEMORIES

It seems to me like yesterday, I don't need specs to see,
When first I ran away to school in eighteen sixty-three;
My feet were bare, uncombed my hair, I didn't care a fig,
For don't you see I mean to be a scholar very big.
The two long miles I shorten'd quick, o'er which I had to go,
My brain was not quite empty, I knew both K and O;
And thought I'd soon a master be if ma would let me go.
On reaching school I skinned my eyes when looking at the crowd,
Of lads, and all bareheaded, and shouting out aloud;
And I a new arrival was, and boy but was I proud.
The master's gaze I felt for days, I nearly see it yet,
Says he you'll do, If my guess is true, I'd almost take a bet;
He asked my name, I told the same, my age was rather hard;
Then he says ask ma, or else papa, and he hung me up a card.
Such letters there before my eyes, and not one did I know,
But sure I'm after telling lies, I knew both K and O,
Oh dear, oh dear, I felt so queer, for I was in a fix,
But not for long, before I left, I knew the twenty-six.
The master came and struck my head, and says "You darling boy.
Now come each day, don't stop away, and non shall you annoy."
I felt a man, and off I ran unto my mother dear,
For days and days the master's the master's praise was running in my ear.
The school was now my hobby, and from it I would not stay,
My first day's feat I did repeat, and never missed a day;

But the time sped fast, my schooldays passed, I felt a lad no more,
But work away from day to day beside Lough Neagh's shore.
Those years flew past on lightning wings, some pleasure, more pain,
All work and little pleasure, I can see it o'er again;
The comrades of those far off days have passed to the unknown,
My times not come, I lag behind and ponder all alone.
And now, when old and worn, and my candle burned low,
Life's memories crowd around me, they're passing to and fro;
Regrets are vain, but now again were I a lad from school,
Would I pursue that beaten path, I must have been a fool.

(18 Feb 1928)



The Wind

We have eyes to see, but cannot see
The wind we so plainly hear,
As it rushes and roars through the noble trees,
Till they seem to bend with fear.
That unseen something that man can't still,
That he feels and hears; can't see;
That humbled itself to its Master's will
On the waters of Galilee.
When the waves ran high, and the craft so frail
That carried the Lord of all,
Did seem to founder beneath the gal;e,
His disciples on him did call:
"We perish oh Lord! arise and save,
The waters our craft do fill;"
He arose and rebuked the wind and the waves;
They obeyed Him and all were still
We can see the rain as it falls to earth,
We can see the hail and snow,
We can see the ruins the winds has left;
Though unseen, we can hear it blow.
But its uses are many, although unseen
By us mortals here below;
It drove the ship and it drove the mill,
In the days of the long ago.

With gentle gales it filled the sails,
When Columbus, them unfurled,
And drove him on, though the way was long,
Till he found the Western world.
We can sit at our ease and listen in,
As the winds to us convey
The music and songs that we love to hear,
From places far away.
But the greatest use of the noble wind,
Is supplying the breath unto all mankind,
Unto bird and beast, unto plant and flower,
It gives life to all by its magic power.
Without the wind such a dreary waste,
The world would be, neither man nor beast;
Then unto the Donor, a benison make,
That stilled the wind on that far-off lake.

22 November 1930

The Lover's Parting

They have met tonight, in the pale moonlight,
At the close of a summer day,
Those youthful pair, in the balmy air,
Of lovely month of May.
'Neath a thorn they stand on her father's land,
That fragrance scents the air;
With its mantle of white, on that lovely night,
The moon shines down on them there.
In silence they stand, as he holds her hand,
Till at length he silence breaks;
In his heart is no guile, on his lips no smile,
There's a break in his voice when he speaks.
In his arms he takes her, from her reverie wakes her,
And he tells her in accents of pain –
Though he's grieved to heart, that he from her must part,
His path lies across the broad main.

"I am young, but I am poor, and I cannot endure
To make you my partner for life;
I will cross the broad main for my love, Mary Jane,
I will make you a happy young wife.
If God grants me health, I will labour for wealth,
I won't waste it as sometimes before;
For your sake I am going, and sure there's no knowing
The luck that is for me in store.

We stand here tonight, 'neath that Heavenly light,
And I ask you to me to be true
I've short time to stay, got a letter today,
And tonight I must bid you adieu.
Don't unman me by crying, dear sweetheart, for trying
My luck in that land in the west;
No one else shall enslave me, that keepsake you gave me
Lies close to my heart, it is hugged to my breast
When the ocean's dividing, in your fond love abiding,
That picture a mascot will be;
It will act as a charm to keep from me harm
And encourage endeavour when thinking of thee."

"Oh! dear John such a notion away o'er ocean
To go, and to leave me behind;
For my tears will flow, and its little you know
Of the thoughts that will run in my mind;
In that land o'er the main you'll forget Mary Jane,

That behind here in secret will mourn.
You will others admire, dressed in gaudy attire,
Whilst here I await your return."
Dear sweetheart don't fret, I could never forget

You, so long as the tides flow between;
In my absence don't mourn until I return
With wealth for my Irish colleen.

None else shall replace thee, none else shall embraced be
By me unto you I'll be true;
Your photo, sweetheart, will lie close to my heart
To gaze on when thinking of you.”

“Oh I can't stop the tears, for I know 'twill be years
Before I see you again;
In that far distant nation, when you meet with temptation,
Then think of your love, Mary Jane.
Let grandeur not blind you, let beauty not bind you, -
Sweet voices but false at the heart;
With their powders and paints, you will think they are saints,
Then remember your true love from whom you did part.
One kiss ere we part now, my darling sweetheart,
For now I must bid you adieu;
On your knees for me pray, when I'm far, far away,
And to you, I'll be constant and true.
And dry up your tears, you need have no fears,
Our letters will bridge it between;
Sure as Luna shines down shedding brilliance around.
I'll be true to my Irish colleen.”

20 April 1929



Photo by Trevor Cole