Pádraig Turley, Terry Moylan & Laurel Grube (eds), *The Complete Poems of John De Jean Frazer – The Workman Poet From Birr*, (Offaly Historical & Archaeological Society/Esker Press, Tullamore, 2023), pp. €20

This collection of the poetic works of 'The Workman Poet From Birr' begins with the question 'who was John De Jean Frazer?' (p. ix). In some respects, the question remains unanswered as the authors acknowledge that a 'degree of uncertainty and mystery about him' remains despite their best efforts to uncover his biography. His birthdate in Parsonstown (Birr) is elsewhere given as 24 March 1803 but here, 1804 is cited as his birthyear.[1] His father was a Presbyterian Minister and the family probably from Huguenot stock explaining the 'De Jean' in the family name. Young Frazer was thought to have been intended for the ministry but poor family finances denied him a costly education. Sources state that he attended a Divinity College and studied theology but he appears instead to have been apprenticed as a cabinet-maker or upholsterer in Green Street, Birr (p. ix).[2]

Frazer had a brother Robert and a sister Elizabeth. The poem 'To the Memory of a Young Artist' was dedicated to the 'only brother of the author' concludes 'Farewell till we meet in the land of the grave / Where the damp of the clay shall dissolve us to one – / Farewell till our spirits in brotherhood wave / The wing of immortals, where'er thou art gone' (pp. 320-323). Elizabeth, married to Patrick Daly, died in 1862 and is buried in the same Glasnevin plot as Frazer himself.[3] Frazer married Letitia Reynolds and they had six children.[4] Two died aged only ten and fifteen, tragedies that inspired the poems 'The Reason For the Poet's Silence', 'The Peerless One' and To a Daughter's Memory' (pp. 417, 337). Such tragedies were commonplace at the time but no less easy to bear for grieving parents and siblings. In the collection, searches for poems are facilitated by indexes of titles and first lines (pp. 451, 455]. Frazer's daughter Letitia married the Fenian leader Thomas Clarke Luby and the couple had four children.[5] His daughter Mary Anne also married a Fenian, John Walsh.[6] The family's American connection is traced through an introductory note – 'Is it serendipity?' – by Laurel Jean Lewis Grube, the poet's great-great-great-granddaughter who provides a family tree and explanation of her journey to recover Frazer's biography (pp. xvi-xx).

Frazer arrived in Dublin in the early 1820s, working as a cabinet-maker, a 'calling of some prestige' but not one that would have enabled him to buy property. At his death, he resided in Jervis Street. An 1885 drawing of him in *The Irish Fireside* provides an indication of his appearance and in a preface to *Songs & Ballads of Young Ireland* in 1896, Martin McDermott remembered 'seeing him once when he was pointed out to me at a meeting':

> 'A pathetic face, square and earnest, with great bomb forehead, and eyes somewhat bleared as though with night work or study; thick set in figure and draped in a long brown overcoat, lightish haired and blue eyed. After much inquiry I failed to obtain a portrait of him.'[7]

The portrait since discovered adorns this book's front cover. In an obituary, J.H.G. described 'the inclined posture of his weakly frame', an indication of his declining health and what would today probably be identified as repetitive strain injuries derived from long hours bent over desk or board, his eyes 'bleared' from poor, candlelight (p. xii-xiii).[8] After Frazer's death there were 'various fund-raising events to help his wife and family' (p. xiii).

Frazer was reported to have joined the Orange Order, although this has not been verified. Under the influence of O'Connell's Repeal Movement, he had clearly left the Order when he published 'Song for July 12th 1843', a 'strong appeal for the Orange and Green to reconcile'. An image of the poem, published in *The Nation* on 8 July 1843, is reproduced in this collection with the poem (pp. 58-59). It concludes 'Till *then* the Orange lily be / *Thy* badge, my patriot brother - / The everlasting Green for *me*; / And – we for one another' (emphasis in the original). Frazer converted to Catholicism in 1844

although Turley reflects that 'this was not exactly a marriage made in heaven' as Frazer 'took grave exception to a local priest holding out on the irreligion of the Young Irelanders' (p. xiii).[9]

Frazer was a prolific poet and a talented water colourist. By today's standards, his poems might be considered sentimental, arcane in language and image and nearly all of a trying length in strict metred form. Moylan provides a stout defence of his artistry and insights into Frazer's use of metre, alliteration, imagery and rhyme in the video *A Presentation of the Birr Poet*, a 'word music'.[10] Gathering them together for this anthology was not straightforward as Frazer used many pseudonyms – 'J De Jean', 'Z', 'Y', 'F', 'Maria' and 'J.A.C. Plane' – a reference to a cabinetmaker's jack plane used for rough finishing. His poems appeared as collections: *Eva O'Connor* in three cantos published in 1826 (p. 1), an epic poem that 'reads like a novel' about a young woman's distress and despair at the hands of a faithless lover;[11] *Poems For the People*, 1845 (pp. 55-57);[12] and *De Jean Poems*, 1851 (pp. 177-179) – the frontispieces and author's introduction being reproduced in the book.[13] In addition, Frazer's work appeared in the *Dublin University Magazine*, *The Pilot*, *Irish Felon*, *Irish Tribune*, *Morning Register*, *The Nation* and, as will be shown, the *Irish Trades Advocate*, thus presenting the compilers of this anthology a significant challenge.

In Turley's introduction, Frazer's work was set in the times he lived in – the American and French Revolutions, Napoleonic Wars, Luddism, Tithe Wars, Chartism, the emergence of trade unionism, Catholic Emancipation, the collapse of Repeal and the Famine. His response was, increasingly, to identify 'all Ireland's ills with English repression' (p. xiv). He clearly socialised among advanced nationalists and was referred to as 'the poet of the 1848 rebellion'.[14] His memory lived on as in Seán O'Casey's 1958 play *The Drums of Father Ned*, he quotes Frazer's 'Song For the 12th July 1843' and a 'De Jeans' club was affiliated to the Dublin County Board of the GAA in 1888.[15] That said, after his death on 23 March 1852, Frazer receded from local and national memory, this collection serving to revive interest in and appreciation of his work. J.H.G.'s obituary ended with the words 'Poor Frazer! Thou hast from a cold and shabby world to where we shall all soon join there – the happy, happy grave! May thou rest in peace – Amen' (p. xiv).[16]

Offaly Historical & Archaeological Society are to be congratulated on the publication of Frazer's *Complete Poems*. It follows a blog and video presentation of his life, both available on the internet.[17] Terry Moylan ably complements Turley's groundwork drawing on his considerable knowledge of the songs of working people and radical movements.[18] The poems are accompanied by some explanatory, contextual notes (pp. 434-443) and musical settings for nine songs, including 'Song For July 12th, 1843', appropriately to 'The Boyne Water' (pp. 444-448). A challenge for readers is take these songs from the page to a listening audience, a true remembrance of Frazer.

Frazer's *Poems For the People* was dedicated to 'the Irish people in admiration and honour of their enduring resistance to oppression' but some reviews regarded his 'militant political verse' as 'mostly indistinguishable from much similar stuff of the period'.[19] The same observer nevertheless identified a 'real gentleness and feeling in short passages of reminiscence on childhood pastimes around Birr', a number of poems reflecting his love of his native place still string after years in Dublin. His 'Clondallagh' is typical: 'Are the orchards of Scarragh / With apples still bending? / Are the wheat-ridge and furrow / On Cappaghneale blending? / Let them bend – let them blend ! – / Be they fruitful or fallow, / A far dearer old friend / Is the bog of Clondallagh' (pp. 343-345). This verse, again suitable to sing if edited, contains amusing evidence of Frazer's creativity in its final lines: 'If whole days of a childhood / More mournful than merry, / I sought thro' the wild wood / Young bird or ripe berry; / Some odd sprite, or quaint knight, / Some Sinbad, or Abdullah / Was my chase by the light / Of bog fir from Clondallagh!' By the time Frazer thought of Abdullah, he had used fallow, hallow and shallow to echo Clondallagh and would go on to add callow! For local historians, Frazer's 'Brosna's Banks' concludes 'My memory

may – tho' not my grave – / Be green upon the Brosna's Banks' (pp. 175-176), a memory now able to flourish again with this commemorative volume.

Such verses reflect those by another poet whose worked was honed in the bogs and hills around Birr. Born four days after Frazer's death on 27 March 1852 in Rathniska, Kilskyre, County Meath, Jim Connell would gain universal fame as the author of the socialist anthem 'The Red Flag' but his life-long passion for poaching and nature was developed when his father was groom on the Earl of Rosse's estate at Birr Castle. Whether Connell knew of Frazer's work is unknown but his own verse and songs reflected similar sentiments of anti-landlordism, workers' rights and Irish self-determination.[20] Frazer's last verses appeared in the seven issues of the *Irish Trades Advocate*, published between 13 September and 23 October 1851. Frazer edited the paper under the masthead proclamation: 'A Fair Day's Wages For A Fair Day's Work' and his poems are presented in this volume as 'Lays of Labour' (pp. 357-372). J.H.G. thought Frazer had 'written nothing at all superior to some of these effusions' with 'The Working Man', 'The Mond of the Age' and 'The Prophecies of Heaven' being 'philosophically sublime' (p. 358).

In 'We Want But What We Earn', Frazer expounds radical, socialist thinking, advanced ideas and demands for the time: 'No privilege for high-born wealth / O'er want – its low-born neighbour! / No idleness, by force or stealth, / To eat the bread of labour! – / But sharing all life's fruits and flowers, / Let each his right discern, / And have it, by this rule of ours, - / We want but what we earn!' (pp. 360-361). Frazer added education and health to workers' basic demands. In 'The Working Man', he called for action: 'He – whose proud front might still be first, / Tho' angels marched in vain: / Will be degraded – kicked – and cursed! – Arouse thee, Working Man!' (pp. 362-363). He uses 'my comrades' in 'We Conquer All Before Us' and suggests, in 'The Mind of the Age', 'There is a mind in every age, / Which governs man's endeavour; / And writes upon the world's wide page, / Its date, and deeds, for ever!' (pp. 368-369). The 'mind', though not expressly stated, being a collective, primitive socialist world view. This position concludes the last verse of 'The Struggles of the Masses' – suggestive of Marxian language: 'Now vast convulsion heaves the world; / And soon, before all faces, / The lower strata will be hurled, / To earth's proud upper places: – / For once, let kings defend the throne – / And chief their several classes – / *Our* arms are for *ourselves alone*, – / The wronged, and trampled masses!' (pp. 370-371).

The front page of the first edition of the *Irish Trades Advocate* bore a list of employers observing the rates set down by the Regular House Carpenters of Dublin in the Carpenters' Asylum, Lower Gloucester Street, who viewed 'with dismay the many cases of wrong practise' among a 'certain class representing themselves as Regular Builders'. They felt that 'in order to undeceive the Public', it was 'imperative to publish a list of Regular employers'.[21] Frazer's own cabinet making trade had a long tradition of organisation, the minutes of the Belfast Cabinet Makers; Club or Belfast Cabinet Makers' Trade Society dating from May 1788 and regarded as the earliest example of trade union minutes. The Dublin Samaritan Society of Cabinetmakers was active from the 1820s- the time Frazer began practising his trade in the capital – and, although illegal, appears to have tolerated by employers. Together with other Irish societies, it would merge into the Alliance of Cabinet Makers' Society in the 1860s.[22] The *Irish Trades Advocate* demanded the 'Rights of the Working Man … to improve the condition of the working-classes'. These included tenant rights, the manufacture movement for national self-reliance, association into one body for 'its efficacy in renovating society' and education for 'Knowledge is Power'. As editor, Frazer held these values marking him out as an important trade union and socialist pioneer.

Trade unionism was in its organisational infancy. The Regular Trades Association had been formed in Dublin in 1846. Significantly, its journal, *The Guardian and Tradesmen's Advocate*, started on 31 October that year, bore the slogan 'A Fair Day's Wages For A Fair Day's Work'.[23] Frazer was no doubt aware of the *Guardian*. A lull in citywide organisation followed – and the *Irish Trades Advocate* did not appear to represent any specific organisation nor did it carry notices from any collective body – until

the creation of the Dublin United Trades Association in 1863, almost a decade after Frazer's passing. It would appear that Frazer was moving from his support for radical nationalist movements towards a broader social, if not socialist, view. The Peterloo Massacre of 1819 was said to be influential on Frazer's worldview and, in 1848 democratic, liberal and anti-monarchy revolutions had occurred across Europe with the Young Ireland revolt at home. Frazer drew on and reflected all these movements.

In 1896, Lady Mary Catherine Ferguson reflected on the life of Samuel Ferguson describes her husband's visit to Frazer, one of the first after the Fergusons' marriage in August 1848. It was to the 'poor but decent home of the mechanic, the poet Fraser [sic], who, while earning his crust in a poor town dwelling by manual labour, could project his imagination into scenes of his childhood', again a reference to Clondallagh and the Brosna (p. xiv).[24] That Ferguson should choose to visit Frazer in his own – and that his wife should recall the meeting over forty year later – suggests that Frazer was held in high regard in established, contemporary literary circles.

Pádraig Turley, Terry Moylan and the Offaly Historical & Archaeological Society are to be congratulated on producing a wonderful collection of Frazer's essentially lost poems. They should appeal to folklorists, labour and local historians, those interested in Repeal and Young Ireland, in short a breadth of people, all of whom will find themselves reflected in Frazer's words, many, despite a style frozen in his times. In his last years, Frazer expressed a 'socialist questioning' that remains pertinent and challenging.

Notes

[1] 1813 or 1803 is cited by Desmond McCabe, 'Fraser (Frazer), John (1803/4–1852)', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, www.dib.ie/biography/fraser-frazer-john-a3358 [retrieved 11 December 2023]. They were claims that he was born in either Moystown or Ferbane but Turley's evidence concludes that his birthplace was Birr.

[2] Citing 'Irish workmen poets – J. De Jean John Frazer', *The Irish Fireside*, 10 March 1887. A

[3] Grave VD13 Garden, Glasnevin.

[4] The children were Louisa, 1830; Letitia, 1832; Robert Alexander, 1835; Jane, 1836; John, 1838; and Mary Jane, 1839.

[5] James Patrick Kenyon, John Frazer Stephens, Katherine Letitia and Thomas Christopher, the latter dying on 19 October 1863, aged one month. Luby was born in Dublin on 15 January 1822, son of a Church of Ireland Minister and a devout catholic. In 1845, he graduated from Trinity and, until 1848, studied law at the King's Inns and Gray's Inn, London though he never practised law. He joined the Repeal Association and became involved with the Young Ireland movement. He was arrested after various insurrectionary endeavours and calls for independence in the Irishman newspaper and peasant proprietorship. On 17 March 1858, James Stephens and Luby founded the Irish Republican Brotherhood. After the suppression of the Irish People in September 1865, Luby, O'Donovan Rossa, and Kickham were tried for treason-felony and imprisoned. After six years, Luby, Devoy, O'Donovan Rossa and O'Leary were released after an Amnesty campaign led by Isaac Butt. Luby left for America where he died in Jersey City in 1901. See Catherine B. Shannon, Luby, 'Thomas Clarke (1822–1901), leading Fenian, journalist, and historian', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, www.dib.ie/biography/luby-thomas-clarke-a4901 [retrieved 21 December 2023].

[6] Walsh, 1850-1882, was born in Baltracy, County Kildare, and died in New York. He was imprisoned for his part in the Fenian Rising of 1867 but acquitted in 18968 of 'shooting with felonious intent'.

[7] *The Irish Fireside*, 30 September 1885; Martin MacDermott, *Songs & Ballads of Young Ireland*, (Downey & Co. London, 1896).

[8] Rev John Hennebery Green, *The Nation*, 10 April 1852.

[9] The Frazers' children were baptised Catholic, boys, and Presbyterian, girls, in the fashion of the day's mixed families.

[10] *A Presentation of the Birr Poet John Frazer (J. de Jean),* www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW83gE5S6kc [retrieved 21 December 2023].

[11] *Eva O'Conor*, (Richard Milliken, Grafton Street, Dublin, 1826). Moylan's assessment in *A Presentation of the Birr Poet.*

[12] *Poems For the People*, (J. Browne, Dublin, 1845).

[13] *De Jean Poems*, (James McGlashan, Liverpool & London, 1851).

[14] *United Irishman*, 4 March 1848.

[15] Turley points to the friendship between Frazer and GAA founder Michael Cusack, see fn. 16.

[16] *The Nation*, 27 March 1852.

[17] Pádraig Turley, 'Anniversary of Birr poet John de Jean Frazer (1804-1852)', https://offalyhistoryblog.wordpress.com/2022/03/23/anniversary-of-birr-poet-john-de-jean-frazer-by-padraig-turley/; and Terry Moylan, https://offalyhistoryblog.wordpress.com/2022/11/23/who-is-the-birr-poet-john-de-jean-frazer-by-terry-moylan/ [retrieved 21 December 2023].

[18] See his *Johnny O'Leary of Sliabh Luachra: Dance Music from the Cork-Kerry Border,* (Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1994, 2014); *The Age of Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition, 1776-1815,* (Lilliput Press, Dublin 2000); and *The Indignant Muse: Poetry & Songs of the Irish Revolution 1887-1926*, (Lilliput Press, Dublin, 2016).

[19] McCabe, 'Fraser (Frazer), John', *op. cit*.

[20] Francis Devine, 'Connell, James [Jim] (1852-1929), socialist and writer of the Red Flag', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38721 [retrieved 21 December 2023); and '… All the time a poacher' in Jim Connell, Confessions of a Poacher, (Lilliput Press, Dublin, 2004), pp. 151-173.

[21] *Irish Trades Advocate*, 13, 20 September 1851.

[22] Francis Devine & John B. Smethurst, *Historical Directory of Trade Unions in Ireland*, (Irish Labour History Society/Working Class Movement Library, Dublin/Salford, 2017), pp. 221-228

[23] John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, (Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 1988), pp. 47-53.

[24] Lady Ferguson, *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of His Day*, (Blackwood, London, 1896; Forgotten Books, London, 2018). Sir Samuel Ferguson, 1810-1886, was a distinguished poet, barrister, antiquarian and, from 1867, First Deputy Keeper of Public Records of Ireland.