Poet's Grave Amid the City's Waste

By JAMES C. YOUNG

OUT toward the fringe of New York, just on the edge of Long Island Sound, there century-old graveyard, some headstones almost level with the earth, others nodding toward one another. In the distance rise the steel frames of many half-completed apartments, ugly things against the sky. Roundabout on three sides are little hillocks of refuse, stretching in all directions. Goats wander around and old women with big bags search amid the litter for some usable object. This is the public dump near Hunt's Point and here lies a poet's grave.

Tomb of Drake.

Drawn by E. M. Trandzen.

When these same wastes were green fields and the birds sang along the old Hunt's Point road Joseph Rodman Drake used to pass this way and go out to the big Hunt mansion on the point, where some of his kinsmen lived. He loved this country, stretching away in unbroken beauty for miles and miles, with the Sound as the starting point. And when time came for him to die he asked to be buried in the little family graveyard of the Hunts, where one may still see their names on the stones, along with the Tillous and others buried there. Drake died on Sept. 21, 1820, when he had just turned 25, leaving behind him some of the sweetest verse of our early era and one noble piece by which he is best known, "The American Flag." Every school boy remembers that

When freedom from her mountain height
Unfurled her standard to the air
She tore the azure robe of night
And set the stars of glory there.

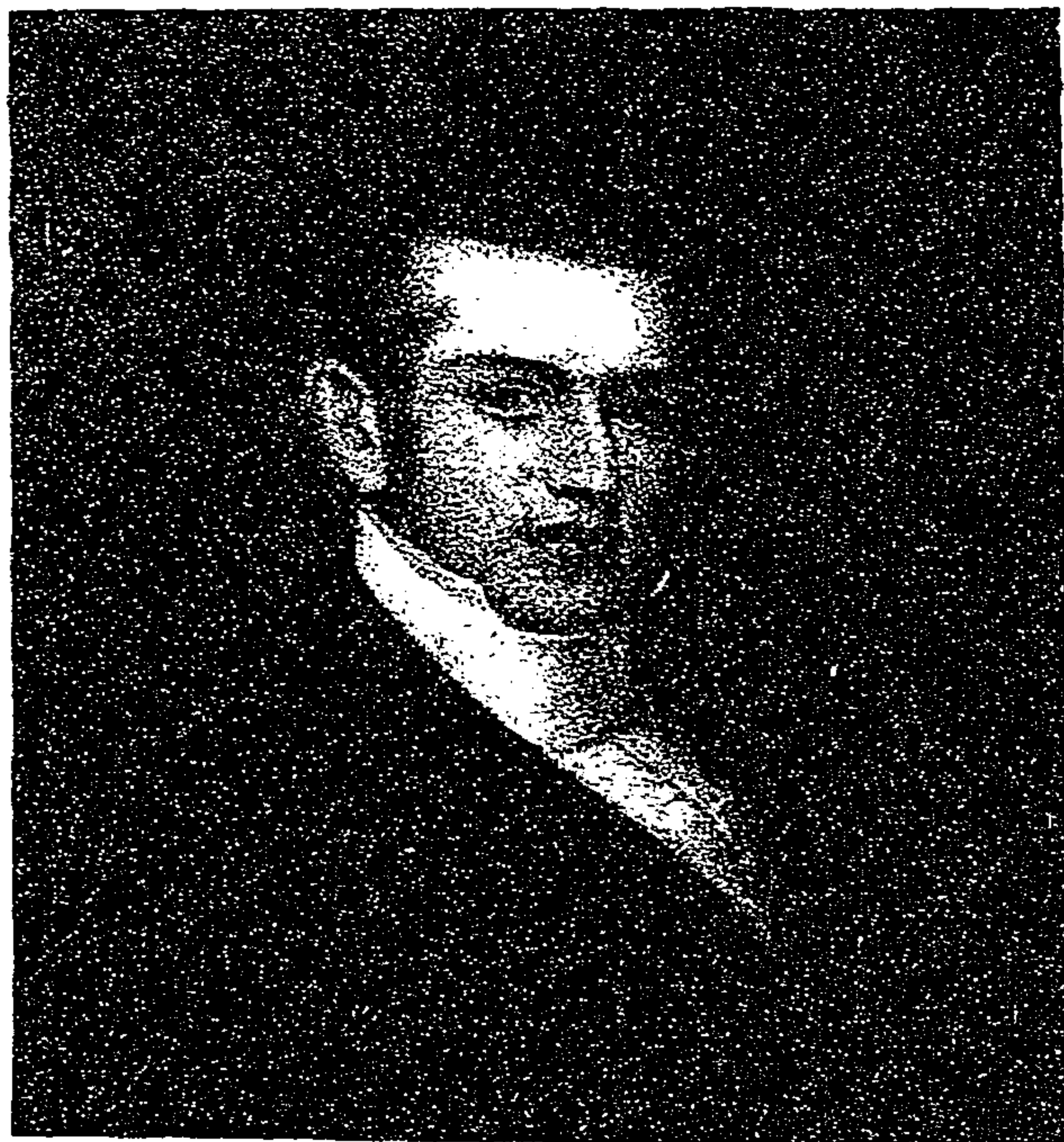
In those days of a century and more ago Drake traveled by post road from New York, the West Farms coach bringing him to a crossroad where he would be met by one of the Hunt conveyances. Then on into the country, through the very vales and smiling land he has sung about in one of his poems to the Bronx.

Drake belonged to the same period as Rip Van Winkle's creator—Washington Irving—and was an intimate of his, along with twenty other men who made up the literary elect of a century ago. That was the Knickerbocker period in American literature, and Drake gave promise of being one of its finest products. He died much too early, of consumption, and many therefore have called him the American Keats.

After the poet was laid away most of the Hunts passed on and the other old families of the neighborhood were broken up. So Drake's grave lay forgotten through many a long year. The top of the stone above his resting place fell off and some of the newcomers in the neighborhood, forty years or more ago, fixed up his grave a bit. Then, in 1891, the Brownson Literary Union made a further restoration. But the big city pushed northward, and some practical mind decided that the grave should be obliterated to make way for a street. The Bronx Society of Arts and Sciences intervened in 1915, and now the shaft above Drake bears a bronze tablet with the opening verse of a memorial poem to him, written by his friend and crony, Fitz-Greene Halleck. There is a tiny iron fence about the grave and the plot is known as Joseph Rodman Drake Park.

The story of Drake and his time is almost the story of America. He came from the same strain as that fine old sea rover, Sir Francis Drake, a family which ran more strongly to fighting men than poets. A certain John Drake of Devonshire came over to Boston in 1630 and afterward moved to East Chester, N. Y. There he acquired a fine estate, bounded on one side by the Bronx. And the name of Drake henceforth figured creditably in American history.

Jonathan, father of the poet, was an officer in the Revolution and is described as a remarkably handsome man, which may be well believed, looking at the picture of his no less handsome son. The poet's mother was Hannah Lawrence of Flushing, L. I., and he was born Aug. 7, 1795. Drake began life favored by its sweetest smile, but this soon turned to a frown. His father died and his mother married again. He was still a schoolboy, but elected to stay with some of his people rather than go to New Orleans with his mother. The records are a little vague. Surely his mother did not leave him unprovided for, and certainly the Hunts helped look after him. Whatever the circumstances, we hear of him writing verses at 10. He emerges around 14 as a clerk and embryo poet, complaining of poverty. Clerking palled on him, and verses would not yield a living. So he began to study medicine, and would seem to have qualified as a physician at 20. His life moved swiftly. He had picked up a good deal of classic learning from the slenderest schooling and acquired his M. D. the same way. But, whether clerking, studying or tinkering with medicine, he was forever versifying.



Joseph Rodman Drake.

Painted by John Paradise.
Engraved by Francis S. King.

Drake was 18 when he met Halleck. They were near the same age and rode the same Pegasus. Halleck was just as poor, working in a counting house by compulsion and writing verse as chance offered. Oddly enough, Drake would not seem to have held his own talents highly, but greatly esteemed Halleck's gifts. Halleck, destined to live much longer, until 1867, and to see the fruition of his gifts, strongly urged Drake to take himself seriously.

This was a fine Damon and Pythias friendship, and we may imagine these two working into the night beside their tallow dips when they should have been sharpening quills to cast up accounts. But it was not all work or poetry for these young gentlemen. They came of good families and were not unwelcome at fine old homes, although the mothers of marriageable daughters must have thought their prospects slim enough. The two visited a good deal at the home of Mrs. Peter Stuyvesant, south of St. Mark's Church in Stuyvesant Square, with gardens running down to the East River. And the home of a Colonel Russell was another favorite meeting place, both for them and other young literati of the day, including Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Richard Henry Dana, Gulian C. Verplanck, Brockden Brown and a dozen more, now famous or forgotten. We can imagine such a company, gathered in one of those splendid drawing rooms, with the fire crackling on the open hearth, discussing art and literature as living things.

On one such occasion as this Drake took issue with Cooper on the quality of inspiration to be found in American scenery. Cooper had been reading the Scottish bards, and remarked that their wild country gave a peculiarly fine quality to their verses. But Drake insisted that American scenery afforded all the inspiration to be found anywhere. And he offered to prove it.

Three days later he appeared with a manuscript copy of "The Culprit Fay," and we may conceive of him declaiming to the listening Cooper and Halleck and the rest. There really is nothing better by an American in the field of imaginative poetry. This is a piece without a single human creature in it, the writer keeping in the background as a witness of things seen in the highlands of the Hudson on a pleasant night, when the fays come forth and all that splendid company of fairies and fauns which used to trip across poetic pages.

In style "The Culprit Fay" unquestionably was eighteenth century English at its most poetic pitch. But in fancy and feeling it just as certainly was that of Joseph Rodman Drake. If there ever had been any doubt about his gifts, these were settled. Knickerbocker literary circles accepted him as a poet, and it may be said in passing that the tastes of that time are held by many a good deal more discriminating than those of today.

It was something to be an accepted poet at 20. Undoubtedly all doors were opened to Drake and his friend Halleck, also forging into public attention. One of the houses they visited was that of Henry Eckford, a shipbuilder, with a fine place near what is now Twenty-first Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. It was then far out in the country, a drive to be begun well before nightfall, an admirable place to stop on the way to Hunt's Point for a few days' fishing and hunting. And the Eckford home had special attractions for Drake. These developed into a social item of 1816, announcing that the poet was to wed one of the shipbuilders daughters. After that event the pressure for money lessened somewhat, but a new trouble appeared. His health, always delicate, became alarming, and he began to "take care of himself," as the saying goes.

Drake kept at his poetry despite his health, not in a feverish sort of way, but with sufficient application to produce a number of pieces. His friendship with Halleck grew deeper and broader, and the two wrote and studied much together. This led, in 1819, to a series of pieces written for The New York Evening Post, signed "The Croakers." These were mostly satirical and topical, something like our present-day columns, and were of a quality to excite much interest in the two authors.

Halleck and Drake wrote these bits on alternate days or together, just as fancy dictated. In May of that year Halleck came in one evening to find Drake deep in a poetic creation, which he proceeded forthwith to read.

"Fine," said Halleck, "but I don't like the last four lines. Here, let me change them," and he rapidly wrote substitute lines, which Drake praised and adopted. Thus was "The American Flag" born, a poem which pulsates with that fine patriotism characteristic of the time. It has all the fervor of a young people just starting on its national life and is, perhaps, our finest apostrophe to the flag, beginning:

When freedom, from her mountain height,
Unfurled her standard to the air,
She tore the azure robe of night,
And set the stars of glory there!
She mingled with its gorgeous dyes
The milky baldric of the skies,
And striped its pure, celestial white
With streakings of the morning light;
Then, from his mansion in the sun,
She called her eagle-bearer down,
And gave into his mighty hand
The symbol of her chosen land!

This piece was in a much more popular vein than "The Culprit Fay" and struck sparks from the public enthusiasm for everything American. Drake a second time found himself acclaimed a poet. But acclamations mattered little to him. This was the last flash of the dying talent. He may have written other things, and probably did, but none of them live on as his two major creations.

As for the man himself, the end was near. He could not fail to realize his condition. It came on Sept. 21 of the year after he wrote his best known poem. All of his old friends gathered around. Halleck, deeply moved at the loss, sung his memory in verses which are well known. The first has been used many times the world over, since then, to commemorate a friend:

Green be the turf above thee,
Friend of my better days!
None knew thee but to love thee,
Nor named thee but to praise.

Tears fell when thou wert dying,
From eyes unused to weep,
And long, where thou art lying,
Shall tears the cold turf steep.

When hearts whose truth was proven,
Like thine, are laid in earth,
There should a wreath be woven,
To tell the world their worth.

And I who wake each morrow,
To clasp thy hand in mine,
Who shared thy joy and sorrow,
Whose weal and woe were thine.

It should be mine to braid it
Around thy faded brow;
But I've in vain essayed it
And feel I cannot now.

While memory bids me weep thee,
Nor thoughts nor words are free;
The grief is fixed too deeply
That mourns a man like thee.

Such was the poet laid away in the little country graveyard, now just beyond the end of the Hunt's Point car line, where the trash carts go.

The New York Times
Published: April 15, 1923
Copyright © The New York Times