

These publications are the first step in a much larger and ambitious project. The final goal is a doctoral dissertation on the philosophical thought of O'Brien and the first complete edition of his most important writings, in a modern and scholarly format. Hopefully, this resource will contribute to and further research into nineteenth-century American literature and Gothic literature in general and on O'Brien specifically.

## Sketch of O'Brien \*

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by  
William Winter

That the facts of a man's life which can be stated are but poorly adequate to convey a full sense of what that life really was is a truth that receives additional illustration in this imperfect biography. Yet this record is as nearly complete as careful research and conscientious labor can now make it. The more important part of the life of its subject was his intellectual and spiritual experience. The history of his mind, however, is written in his works. It is only attempted, in this place, to set down the incidents of his career.

Fitz-James O'Brien was born in the county of Limerick, Ireland, about the year 1828. His father was an attorney-at-law. His mother was a lady of remarkable beauty. He received a good education at Dublin University. He was not trained, however, to either of the learned professions; but it is remembered that he claimed to have been at one time a soldier in the British service. He very early evinced a taste and aptitude for writing verses; and among his first works are two poems, entitled "Loch Ine" and "Irish Castles," which appear, without an author's name, in "The Ballads of Ireland," collected and edited by Edward Hayes (1856). On leaving college he went up to London, where, in the course of about two years, he spent his inheritance, stated at eight thousand pounds. In 1851, according to a somewhat dubious report, he edited, in London, a periodical devoted to the World's Fair. Late in that year, or early in 1852, he found it essential to seek his fortune in the New World. One of his friends was Dr. Collins, brother to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Cloyne, and through his influence O'Brien obtained letters of introduction, from Dr. R. Shelton Mackenzie, — then editor of a newspaper in Liverpool, and correspondent for the *New York Evening Star*, — addressed to Major Noah, General George P. Morris, and other prominent citizens of the American capital. With these, on his arrival here, the adventurous young poet made an auspicious entrance into society and literature; and it was not long before his singularly brilliant abilities were recognized, and he became a general favorite. In that way his American career began, which was destined, within the brief period of ten years, to be signalized by the production of some of the most original and beautiful poems and stories in the literature of his time, to flow through many painful vicissitudes and much trouble, and to end abruptly in a soldier's grave.

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\* "Sketch of O'Brien" by William Winter, *The Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien*, Boston: James R. Osgood & Company, 1881: xiii — xxviii.

The chronicle of his literary life must, necessarily, be discursive. It was in no sense more eventful than such lives usually are, — except that it was more painfully irregular and more startlingly productive. His earliest writings here were published by John Brougham, in the *Lantern*. "When I first knew him," says his old comrade, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, "he was trimming the wick of the *Lantern*, which went out shortly afterwards." In that paper appeared, among other of his productions, the touching poem of "An Old Story," "The Ballad of Sir Brown," "The Gory Gnome," and "The Wonderful Adventures of Mr. Papplewick." At one of Brougham's weekly dinners, in Windust's old place, near the original Park Theatre, — at which the writers and artists of his *Lantern* were regularly convened, and at which everything but the paper was discussed, — O'Brien made the acquaintance of the artist and author, Mr. Frank H. Bellew, who became one of his intimate friends. The New York residences were, in those days, much further "down town" than they are now, and O'Brien and Bellew at one time lodged together in Leonard Street, and subsequently in Broadway, immediately opposite to what is now the Metropolitan Hotel, and on the site of the building afterwards locally famous as Stanwix Hall. That, of course, was the season of the light heart and the foaming flagon, when the chimes are heard at midnight and the bloom is on the rye. O'Brien's associations then were largely with the circles that eddied around Willis and Morris; and at that time he wrote a few sketches and verses for the *Home Journal*. His poem which I have named "The Demon of the Gibbet" originally appeared in that paper, under the inexpressive title of "What Befell." He contributed, also, in a fitful and miscellaneous way, to the *Evening Post* and to the *New York Times*; and he wrote for the *American Whig Review* his "Fragments from an Unpublished Magazine." He was, in brief, a literary soldier of fortune; and, with his expensive tastes and already settled habits of extravagance, it is needless to say that in time he found the Grub Street pathway an exceedingly weary road.

The most important literary association that he ever formed was that which made him a regular contributor to *Harper's Magazine*. His first paper in that publication appeared in the number for February, 1853, and is entitled "The Two Skulls." It is scientific and philosophical. He contributed to fifty-two numbers, and there are sixty-six of his productions in that periodical. His pen appears to have been in its most prolific period during the years 1855, '56, and '57. His last paper in *Harper*, a story entitled "How I Overcame my Gravity," was not published till May, 1864, — more than two years after he was dead. He never saw in print, either, — for they also were posthumous publications, — his excellent story of "Tommatoo," or his sad poem of "Down in the Glen at Idlewild." He wrote copiously for *Harper's Weekly*, as well as for the

*Magazine*. His noble ode on Kane was first printed in that journal, and there likewise first appeared his richly fanciful, inventive, picturesque poem of "The Zouaves," — a work which conspicuously illustrates his remarkable faculty for giving an imaginative application to an idea or topic of the passing hour. He wrote stories, too, for *Harper's Weekly*, and he wrote a series of familiar letters, called "The Man about Town," which, even at this distance of time, can be read with pleasure, for the liveliness of their spirit and the grace of their style. All this while he was writing, as capricious fancy prompted or as the spur of necessity compelled, in other quarters. The veteran James W. Wallack was one of his dearest friends, and for Wallack's theatre he wrote several bright little pieces, — spirited in idea, impetuous in spirit, and clean and polished in mechanism, — which were acted well, and which found a ready acceptance. One of these, "A Gentleman from Ireland," still keeps the stage, and will long be found serviceable to the dashing light comedian. For Laura Keene's theatre, at the instance of Jefferson, — then its stage manager and principal actor, — he adapted one of Brough's burlesques; and this piece, under the title of "The Tycoon," was produced during the visit of the first Japanese Embassy to this country. He was possessed of a strong dramatic sense and had a good knowledge of the stage, — the latter having been acquired in his London days, — and, although he was inclined to push the theory of "natural" acting much too far, as may be seen in his tale of "Mother of Pearl," he could write with incisive judgment and informing taste on the acted drama. He did so in the autumn of 1858, in the *New York Saturday Press*; and one of his dramatic articles, in particular, — a disquisition upon the tragedy of "Hamlet," with Mr. Barry Sullivan as the melancholy Dane, — is remarkable equally for poetic intelligence, acute analysis, and fine description. To *Putnam's Magazine* — that noble monument to the exquisite taste of George William Curtis — he was a contributor in the first number and for several years; and several of the gems of this collection have been taken from that source. He was a diligent writer for *Vanity Fair*, and from those sparkling columns are gathered his grisly fancy of "The Wharf Rat," his athletic and sonorous "Song of the Locomotive," and his idyll of "Strawberries." Two of his most remarkable stories belong to this period of nomadic labor, — "The Diamond Lens" and "The Wondersmith," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, in January, 1858, and October, 1859. They electrified magazine literature, and they set up a model of excellence which, in this department, has made it better than it ever had been, in this country, before those tales were printed.

O'Brien had a great admiration for the strange, wild, passionate genius of Matilda Heron; and it once suited his fancy to travel, as a literary assistant, with H. L. Bateman, — that iron-willed yet genial Boanerges of managers, — who was then directing a

professional tour for that actress. Miss Heron was acting in "Camille," which had but recently been introduced upon the American stage, and in a drama by Mrs. Bateman, entitled "Geraldine." On this trip O'Brien visited Boston, and he remained for some time in that city and its neighborhood; and I remember that he considerably astonished some of the quiet literary circles of that staid and decorous region by his utter and unaffected irreverence for various camphorated figure-heads which were then an incubus upon American letters. It was there and then that I first met him, and first observed that stalwart mind and that formidable frankness of temperament for which he was remarkable. He was now considerably changed from what he had been when he came to America. Mental toil and bodily privation, the hardships of a gypsy life, the reactionary sense of being in false positions and of being misunderstood, — which often will embitter natural sweetness and turn amiability to proud and glittering defiance, — had done their work upon his nature, and made him, in some of his moods, as lawless, arrogant, and truculent, as in others he was gentle, resigned, affectionate, and almost forlorn. In his face and carriage there was the strong and splendid freedom of the wild woods; yet at times there came into his eyes a weary look of unrest, and a quite indescribable light of dangerous, half-slumbering wrath, — as of a soul that was a hunted vagabond standing sentinel over its own desolation. I was attracted toward him by a profound sympathy, and we became comrades and friends, and so remained to the end. I have heard that, when he first established himself in New York, he dwelt in comfortable quarters and surrounded himself with appliances of luxury. His raiment was superb; his library was excellent; his furniture was tasteful; and, like De Mauprat, he was "splendid in banquets." His personal appearance in those days — before, as happened in June, 1858, his nose had been broken by the blow of a pugilist — was singularly attractive. He had a fair and glowing complexion, and waving brown hair; his eyes were gray-blue, large, brilliant, and expressive; his smile was honest and sweet, and his countenance frank and winning; he was of the middle stature, an athlete in person, and he moved with negligent grace. His voice was rich in quality, loud and clear, and he had a bluff and breezy manner of speech, tending at times to a joyous turbulence. In a general way he retained these characteristics; but at the time of our companionship he had emerged from his condition of elegance, and his fortunes were low. He had no property; he was at variance with many old acquaintances; his face had suffered disfigurement; he lived nowhere in particular; and he was thoroughly well acquainted with hard times. I found him, in those gypsy days, a delightful associate. His animal spirits were prodigious. His literary invention was alert, vigorous, and almost incessant. His enjoyment of the passing hour was so keen, that it

gave a zest to the enjoyment of all around him. No matter how close poverty might pinch, or how dark the clouds might lower over the portal of the future, the laugh of O'Brien blew care away from the cup of life, as the foam is blown from the white caps of the sea.

His habits of literary composition, as will be surmised, were erratic. A man less buoyant than he would have been paralyzed by the hardships through which he drifted and labored. But, amid chaos or tempest, he was always seeing, always thinking, always at work. Perhaps he liked best to drift in the sunshine and to make merry with genial companions; but he could nerve himself to effort when the occasion demanded it, and he could execute prodigious tasks with amazing celerity. Times of indolence and times of tremendous exertion checkered his life along the whole of its course. He was not a fluent writer, because he thought deeply, and wrote logically, and was fastidious in taste; but his creative literary impulse was exceedingly strong, and his feeling was earnest. He possessed an ample and ready command of the resources of literary art, his mind was replete with what it had absorbed in hours of apparent idleness, and he worked with relentless purpose and absorbing zeal. In this way it chanced that he could accomplish a formidable task in a surprisingly short time, yet always deliver his work rounded and finished as if with the scrupulous labor of weeks. His poem of "A Fallen Star," for example, was written in my lodging, between midnight and morning, at one sitting, and he left the original draft upon the table, having made a clean copy of it for the press. A facsimile of a page of that manuscript is given in this volume, and it strikingly reveals the care with which he wrote. His poem of "The Sewing Bird" was also written in my lodging, within the course of two nights, and I have kept the pen with which it was written, as a relic of a remarkable effort. I never saw him so deeply depressed as he was then, — and with good reason, for he was destitute, cheerless, and hungry; and whenever that was his case he would not share with a comrade, and even when food was left in his way he would not take it. He sold "The Sewing Bird" for one hundred dollars, and a few hours later he was as merry as a brook in spring-time. One of his favorite haunts was the old Hone house, in Broadway, at the southeast corner of Great Jones Street; and there, under very similar circumstances, in the course of an evening, he produced the ringing poem of "The Lost Steamship." His story of "What Was It?" was written at odd moments, in the lodging of his friend Aldrich, in Clinton Place. These details have a trivial sound, but somehow they help to give a lifelike picture of the man, — displaying, back of the strange circumstances under which his literature was produced, the still stranger nature that produced it.

The burden laid upon the poet is, that he must feel and express the great and varied elemental passions of humanity, yet never himself depart from the perfect poise of a sane and decorous

life. All literary history is the narrative of his endeavor, with a greater or less degree of failure, to achieve this perfect result. All literary criticism abounds in censure of him because — being a man and not a god — he falls short of his object. Yet through the everlasting march of the ages he still strives onward; still obeys his inexorable fate; still tries to utter for all mankind the voice of the universal heart; and still, amid the flying echoes of his own celestial music, he may stray into sin and sorrow, he may faint and falter by the way, and so drop into a lamentable grave. O'Brien was in no wise more successful than some others of his kind. He fulfilled his destiny as well as he could. The attrition of his character with his circumstances developed faults and impelled to errors. He was, personally, very far from being a perfect creature. He was not deficient in moral sense; on the contrary, his perception of right and wrong was uncommonly keen; but he was deficient in moral courage and in stability of principle, and what was originally noble in his moral nature had been to some extent marred, though not spoiled, by conviviality and chronic improvidence. His conduct was never intentionally wrong, but it was sometimes marked by a heedless irregularity in the ordinary affairs of life, such as, to many persons, is almost as culpable as bad intention. He knew this, and his realization of it only enraged him against his own defects. He was at times haughty and combative; partly because of his Hibernian blood, and partly, no doubt, because of his resentful conviction that he deserved — by his powers, his achievements, and the possibilities of his mind and future — a higher position in literature than had ever been accorded to him. But, so far as I ever could learn, his faults and errors did serious injury to no one but himself; while for the creation of literature he was, in the hands of Fate, a magnificent instrument. There was such a breezy audacity in his genius, that, thinking of him after all these years, I feel a thrill of barbaric joy, as if youth itself were come back. He was like a giant oak, responsive to the midnight gale, and exultant in its rage. He was like the ocean swept by the tempest, that answers with clarion tumult and savage delight. He never paltered with life, nor fawned on the tedious little self-constituted potentates with whom the avenues of society are infested. He did not approach literature with timid deprecation, but he fronted his work royally, and he performed it. He spoke his mind, and he neither valued life nor feared death. Thus constituted, — sensitive to the grandest influences of nature and the tenderest touch of art, — the mystic spirit that is in creation could play upon him at its will, and sound what stops it pleased. Time, no doubt, would have improved this organ of the Muse, — would have broadened and mellowed its tones, and made it vocal with yet more heavenly emotion. The noble instrument was too soon broken; the life that promised so much was too soon quenched in the darkness of the grave.

Nevertheless, in what was uttered — and is now preserved — there lives a rich and buoyant power, and a wonderful soul of beauty. Here, garnered in his pages, are rich creations of the imagination, splendid or somber pictures, original conceptions of character, rare bits of description, fine strokes of analysis of life, strong pæans of joy, and sad wails of grief. Here is the eloquent and beautiful manifestation of a genius, broad in its scope, affluent in its tide, adequate in its strength, brilliant in its splendor, gentle and humane in its teaching and influence. Such works are the best interpreters of their own beneficence. There is no end and no measure to the good that literature accomplishes when, through the ministrations of beauty, it helps to free our souls from the hard conditions under which life is imposed upon the human race.

The venerable Shelton Mackenzie, in a gracious and tender letter, responsive to inquiries of mine, refers to O'Brien's death, in these words: "To die on the field of honor, under the flag of his adopted country, was just the doom his gallant spirit would have craved." It was the doom reserved for him, and he met it bravely and well. He was a lover of liberty and the rights of man, and a staunch, unflinching advocate of the principle of Union in the American Republic. When the war broke out, in 1861, accordingly, he joined the Seventh Regiment of the National Guard of New York, in the hope of being sent to the front, and he was in camp with that regiment at Washington for six weeks. "A brilliant, dashing fellow," writes Colonel Emmons Clark, "very brave, and a universal favorite. He never in any way did anything to hurt the good name of the regiment. He held the rank of Captain, and is so entered on our regimental roll of honor." When the Seventh came home he left it and for a time was occupied in gathering recruits for a volunteer regiment, to be called the McClellan Rifles. He subsequently received an appointment on the staff of General Lander, and at once repaired to the scene of conflict in Virginia. His period of active military service was brief, but he distinguished himself by energy and valor. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, 1862, in a skirmish with Colonel Ashley's cavalry, he was shot, and severely wounded. He lingered till the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, when he died. His death occurred at Cumberland, Virginia. His body was brought home, and buried with military honors. The last time I saw him in life he took from my hand a copy of Shirley Brooks's novel of "The Silver Cord." He was going to the front. The next time I saw him he was in his coffin. The silver cord had been loosed, and the stormy heart of the poet-soldier was at rest. Even in death his countenance wore its old expression of defiant endurance. His funeral was held in the armory of the Seventh Regiment. The silver-haired veteran Wallack, leaning on Lester's arm, his pale, handsome face wet with tears, stood beside the bier; and round them were clustered many of O'Brien's comrades, now likewise dead and gone. With muffled

drums and martial dirges we bore him to Greenwood Cemetery, and there a guard of honor fired its volley over his tomb, and, with a few flowers from the loving hand of poor Matilda Heron, we left him forever. There his ashes still rest; and there, in time to come, will many a pilgrim to the shrine of genius and of noble valor lay the chaplet of remembrance on the grave of Fitz-James O'Brien.

William Winter  
Fort Hill, New Brighton, Staten Island, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1880.

A DIRGE:  
IN MEMORY OF FITZ-JAMES O'BRIEN.

*DIED, APRIL 6, 1862.*

I.

*Toll, bell,  
With solemn knell,  
For him who fell  
In the galloping fight!  
Trumpets, ring  
To the dirge we sing  
In our hearts that cling  
Round the spirit so bright!  
Roll, drum,  
As the vaulted tomb  
For his early doom  
Is gaping drearly!  
Cold and dead,  
In his stony bed  
Lay him, who lately sang so cheerily!*

II.

*Hush, hush!  
The memories rush  
With impetuous gush  
On heart and head:  
Speak low, —  
None of us know  
Half we forego  
In the gallant dead.  
Plant flowers,  
Not where April showers,  
But tears, like ours,  
Shall make them bloom, —  
And their breath impart  
To each kindred heart  
In the crypt of which  
Is the poet's tomb!*

CHARLES DAWSON SHANLY

*Vanity Fair, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1862.*