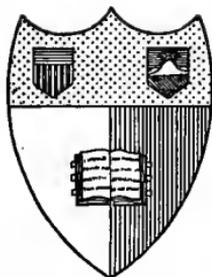


JONES — The Life, Literary Labors and Neglected Grave of  
Richard Henry Wilde. 1885.



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**The Life,**  
**Literary Labors**  
and  
**Neglected Grave**  
of  
**Richard Henry Wilde,**  
by  
**Charles C. Jones, Jr., LL.D.**

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*RICHARD HENRY WILDE:*

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HIS LIFE, LITERARY LABORS, AND  
NEGLECTED GRAVE.

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In the remote and cedar-shadowed portion of a vegetable garden appurtenant to what was once his own home, and what is now the residence of Mr. Fred T. Lockhart, in the beautiful village of Summerville, near the city of Augusta, Georgia, repose, without stone or even grassy mound to designate their resting place, the remains of Richard Henry Wilde. Companion graves there are in this neglected spot, but they are all unmarked save that of an infant son of the poet. The author of "The Lament of the Captive" was interred just south of, and in proximity to, this monument which, more than fifty years ago, paternal affection erected in tender memory of the delicate flower so soon faded. Few among the living are cognizant of the precise place of sepulture; and, ere the recollection be utterly effaced, we would fain revive and perpetuate it even in this ephemeral way. Already there is nothing to inform the visitor that

the illustrious dead is slumbering here. The place is voiceless, and our mother Earth gives no token of the precious trust committed to her keeping. Standing amid the loneliness of this forgotten spot, with what peculiar pathos does that plaintive song which, with prophetic lips, he sang in the long ago, fall upon the attentive ear.

“My life is like the summer rose  
That opens to the morning sky;  
Ere the shades of evening close,  
Is scattered on the ground—to die.

But, on the rose’s humble bed  
The sweetest dews of night are shed,  
As if she wept such waste to see;  
But none shall weep a tear for me.

My life is like the autumn leaf  
That trembles in the moon’s pale ray;  
It’s hold is frail, its date is brief,  
Restless, and soon to pass away.

Yet, ere that leaf shall fall and fade,  
The parent tree shall mourn its shade;  
The winds bewail the leafless tree;  
But none shall breathe a sigh for me.

My life is like the print which feet  
Have left on Tampa’s desert strand;  
Soon as the rising tide shall beat,  
This track will vanish from the sand.

Yet still, as grieving to efface  
All vestige of the human race,  
On that lone shore loud moans the sea;  
But none shall e’er lament for me.

In this youthful country so careless of and indifferent to the memories of other days—where no law of primogeniture enjoins upon the son the conservation of the abode

and the heirlooms of his father—where new fields and novel enterprises are luring succeeding generations from the gardens which delighted and the trees which sheltered those who have gone before,—where paternal estates are, without restraint, alienated at public and private sale,—where landed acquisitions are too often at the mercy of speculative strangers, and family treasures, established inheritances, and old homesteads are seldom guarded beyond present ownership,—it frequently comes to pass that ancestral graves lie neglected, and private burial grounds quickly fall a prey to disuse and oblivion. Under such circumstances it seems a folly to commit our dead to the guardianship of aught other than a public cemetery, where sepulture within its walls is practicable.

While it is true that “oblivion is not to be hired,” while it may not be questioned that in many instances neglected grave-stones “tell truth scarce forty years,” it is most appropriate that to the dead should be accorded secure repose in some enclosure exempt from the casualties of utter inattention and shielded from the mutations incident to private ownership.

What Sir Thomas Browne quaintly styles “the restless inquietude for the diuturnity of our memories,” an inclination to accord permanent and honorable se-

pulture to the distinguished dead, and a desire to dignify their last resting places by suitable monuments, have characterized mankind in all ages. Sympathizing in this sentiment, we fondly hope that the remains of Mr. Wilde will, at an early day, be removed from their present nameless grave, and that they will be reinterred in our city cemetery with a suitable commemorative stone. This removal might appropriately be accomplished at the public charge. It is entirely probable that the relatives of the deceased will acquiesce in the suggestion.

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The name and fame of Richard Henry Wilde the city of Augusta should cherish with pride. He was no ordinary man, and his "Lament of the Captive" will in the future, as it has in the past, embalm his memory in the hearts of all English-speaking peoples. Born in Dublin, Ireland, on the 24th of September, 1789, at an early age he accompanied his father who, an Irish patriot, sought refuge in Baltimore, Maryland, from the troubles and disabilities which at home he could neither surmount nor mitigate. That father dying in October 1802 and leaving his family in slender circumstances, young Wilde repaired to Augusta, Georgia, where he found employment in a dry-goods store owned and managed by Captain John Cormick. So soon as he was fairly established in this position he

persuaded his mother to remove with her children from Baltimore and locate in Augusta. Shortly after her arrival, in association with her son, she opened what was then known as a general store. It was a small establishment, but it sufficed, in a frugal way, to maintain the family. In this business was Richard Henry Wilde engaged for some seven years. Meanwhile he was, as opportunity offered, diligently occupied in general reading and in the acquisition of knowledge. When about eighteen years old he resolved to study law. To that end he entered himself as a student in the office of Joseph Hutchinson, Esq. who kindly assisted him by the loan of necessary text books and aided him by counsel and instruction. While pursuing his law studies he continued to help his mother, and gave his personal attention to the conduct of the store.

At the March term, 1809, of Greenc Superior Court, after an examination which elicited the commendation of Bench and Bar, he was admitted to plead and practice in the Georgia Courts. He was then twenty years of age. Close attention to business and severe study had somewhat impaired his health; but, without pause, he entered upon a professional career which he long maintained with dignity, probity, and ability.

The General Assembly of Georgia had enacted certain laws for the alleviation of the condition of debt-

ors, which seriously impaired the obligation of contracts and hindered lawyers in the lucrative practice of their calling. The constitutionality of this legislation was vigorously attacked by Mr. Wilde, and his connection with this litigation brought him prominently into public notice. So earnest was he in his opposition that at his individual charge he printed a lengthy and carefully considered argument, copies of which he distributed broadcast throughout the State. It exerted a potent influence in moulding the opinion of judges, and won for him the reputation of a vigorous and capable lawyer. His abilities received public recognition and his position at the bar was confirmed by his election to the office of Attorney-General of the State.

When but a fortnight over the constitutional age, Mr. Wilde was chosen a member of the National House of Representatives. Defeated at the next election, he resumed the practice of his profession, which he pursued with marked vigor and success until 1828, when he again entered the Hall of Representatives at Washington, and continued to be a member of the Lower House until 1835. He had seen short service in this capacity in 1825.

He was an attractive specimen of physical and intellectual manhood. Six feet one inch in height, well proportioned, graceful, with an expansive forehead, black, flowing hair,

an emotional mouth and bright eyes, cheerful in his disposition, dignified and yet affable in his address, brimful of anecdote, eloquent in speech, impressive in action and quick at repartee, he shone alike in legislative halls, at the bar, and in the social circle. His habit was to rise at an early hour, take a long walk before breakfast, and then, after the morning meal, devote himself to the labors of the day. His intellectual efforts were, in the main, accomplished while the sun was shining. They seldom extended until a late hour at night. His evenings were spent in relaxation and in social pleasures.

During his Congressional career Mr. Wilde was not a frequent speaker. When he rose, his utterances were characterized by careful preparation. His retorts in debate, while good humored, were sufficiently pungent to be "well remembered by his antagonists." Never were his arguments addressed to passion or party prejudice. In explanation of the fact that he was never a warm partisan, he remarked that "he had found no party which did not require of its followers what no honest man should, and no gentleman would do." As a natural consequence of such convictions and conduct, while he commanded the respect and esteem of all, he was never, in the common acceptance of the term, "a popular politician." In proof of the promi-

ment position he occupied among his fellow-members it will be remembered that, in 1834, he was a leading candidate for the Speakership of the House of Representatives.

Mr. Griswold truthfully remarks that "his speeches on the relative advantages of a Small Note currency, on the Tariff, and on the Removal of the Deposits by General Jackson, bear witness to his industry and sagacity as a politician; and his honesty can hardly be questioned even upon his own caustic rule, since he gained nothing by it." Perhaps the best remembered utterance of Mr. Wilde, during his Congressional career, was that portion of his speech on the Tariff in which he fixes his gaze upon and portrays the characteristics and the influences of the "Stars of the XIVth Congress." Mr. Griswold has reproduced it, in association with a part of his "Review of Campbell's Life of Petrarch," in his "Prose Writers of America."

Differing from a majority of his associates upon the expediency of a Force bill, which he deemed a measure calculated to produce civil war, and having allied himself with those opposed to the Administration of President Jackson, Mr. Wilde was, at the election of 1834, defeated for Congress. Availing himself of the opportunity thus afforded for the gratification of a desire which he had long cherished, he sailed for Europe in 1835. Two years were spent in intelligent travel and care-

ful observation in England, France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. Yielding to the attractions of the literature and art of Italy, for which he entertained a special fondness, he fixed his abode in Florence and there, during the ensuing three years, surrendered himself to the study of the paintings, statuary, monuments, traditions, history, and letters of this famous city. The life of Torquato Tasso excited his profound and melancholy interest. By his short and brilliant career was his imagination captivated. By his subsequent misfortunes was his heart deeply moved. The results of his study of the life and writings, the loves and the transports of this poet, were given to the public in 1842 in two volumes entitled "Conjectures and Researches concerning the Love, Madness, and Imprisonment of Torquato Tasso." The materials for this work were collected with a patient industry surpassed only by the "clear and luminous manner in which the author lays the whole evidence before the reader, and by the ingenuity with which he makes his deductions. The whole investigation is conducted with the care and skill of a practiced lawyer." Masterly is his examination of Tasso's mysterious history. Numerous and admirable are his translations from the Italian, and his style is chaste and classic. The publication of these volumes added very much to Mr. Wilde's literary reputa-

tion which, hitherto, rested upon his speeches, occasional essays, and fugitive poems.

His attention was next directed to the translation of the best specimens of Italian lyric poetry and to the preparation of biographical and critical sketches of their authors. While engaged upon his "Life and Writings of Dante," through the favor of the Grand Duke of Tuscany he obtained privileged access to the secret archives of Florence whence he brought to light many interesting facts "obscurely known, or altogether forgotten even by the people of Italy." In conducting these investigations he learned from an artist of the probable existence of a portrait of this divine poet, from the pencil of Giotto, on a wall in the Bargello which, by some strange neglect, had been obscured by white-wash. The Bargello was, in ancient times, both a prison and a palace. Having obtained the requisite permission Mr. Wilde instituted a careful search which, after the lapse of several months, resulted in the discovery and restoration of a veritable portrait of Dante "in the prime of his days." This event, says Washington Irving, "produced throughout Italy some such sensation as in England would follow the sudden discovery of a well-authenticated likeness of Shakspeare, with a difference in intensity proportioned to the superior sensitiveness of the Italians."

This "Life of Dante" exists, we believe, only in manuscript. If we are correctly informed, it and other Italian studies from the pen of Mr. Wilde are in the possession of his son, Mr. William Cumming Wilde, of New Orleans, whose purpose it is to publish them in connection with a life of his illustrious father.

Upon his return to the United States Mr. Wilde concluded to reside in the city of New Orleans. Thither he went in the latter part of 1842, and there, in association with Mr. William Micon, he resumed the practice of his profession. For some years he filled the chair of professor of constitutional law in the University of Louisiana. In 1846 he fell a victim to yellow fever. Some years afterwards his remains were brought to Georgia and were interred at his old home in Summerville by the side of his first-born son who had died in early childhood. This, it is said, was in accordance with his own wish and the desire of those near and dear unto him. He preferred to sleep in the midst of a community by the elder members of which he had been so thoroughly esteemed and honored.

Two portraits of Mr. Wilde are in existence. They are in the possession of his sister,—the venerable Mrs. Ann C. Anthony of Augusta. One of them was painted by Parker in 1819, and the other by the poet's niece, Miss Clara Wilde, just after his re-

turn from Europe. This latter portrait has been engraved, and accompanies the sketch of Mr. Wilde which appears in Griswold's "Prose Writers of America." To that sketch we acknowledge our present indebtedness.

The only surviving son of the poet resides in New Orleans and inherits the literary correspondence and unpublished MSS of his father. He it was who, in 1867, through Messrs. Ticknor and Fields of Boston, gave to the lovers of poetry, in attractive form, *Hesperia*, which his father seems to have left in condition ready for the printer. Of these cantos, perpetuating recollections of incidents and travel in Florida, Virginia, Acadia and Louisiana, we may not now speak.

Enviably as is Mr. Wilde's reputation as a lawyer, an advocate, a statesman, a poet, and a man of letters, he is best known as the author of that poem commencing

"My life is like the summer rose."

Thus is he always remembered, and in those pathetic lines will he live while the English language endures. From Lord Byron did they elicit the warmest praise. Long have they found cordial welcome and safe lodgment in the general heart. They are indeed the offspring of that poetic, soul-inspiring, divine afflatus which the sweetest singers rarely possess, and to which they seldom give apt expression. Of the circumstances under which they were

composed Mr. Wilde furnishes this account in a letter to an intimate friend:

“The lines in question you will perceive were originally intended as part of a longer poem. My brother, the late James Wilde, was an officer of the United States army, and held a subaltern rank in the expedition of Colonel John Williams against the Seminole Indians of Florida, which first broke up their towns and stopped their atrocities. When James returned he amused my mother, then alive, my sisters and myself with descriptions of the orange groves and transparent lakes, the beauty of the St. John’s river, and of the woods and swamps of Florida—a kind of fairy land, of which we then knew little except from Bartram’s ecstasies—interspersed with anecdotes of his campaign and companions. As he had some taste himself, I used to laugh and tell him I’d immortalize his exploits in an epic. Some stanzas were accordingly written for the amusement of the family at our meeting. That alas! was destined never to take place. He was killed in a duel.\* His violent and melancholy death put an end to my poem; the third stanza of the first fragment, which alludes to his fate, being all that was written afterwards. The Verses, particularly “The Lament of the Captive,” were read by the family and some intimate acquaint-

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\*With Col. Johnston.

ances; among the rest, the present Secretary of State,† and a gentleman,—then a student of medicine, now a distinguished physician in Philadelphia. The latter, after much importunity, procured from me for a lady in that city a copy of ‘My life is like the summer rose,’ with an injunction against publicity which the lady herself did not violate; but a musical composer to whom she gave the words for the purpose of setting them, did; and they appeared, I think, first in 1815 or 1816, with my name and addition at full length, to my no small annoyance. Still, I never avowed them, and though constantly republished in the newspapers with my name and a poetical reply, I maintained that newspapers were no authority, and refused to answer further.”

Subsequently Mr. Wilde found cause not only to avow the authorship of this poem but also to demonstrate to those who accused him of plagiarism the absurdity of their charge. In a charming little volume, printed under the auspices of the Georgia Historical Society in 1871, Mr. Anthony Barclay,—for many years the British Consul in Savannah, and a gentleman of refinement and scholarly tastes,—furnished an authentic account of the “origin, mystery and explanation” of this alleged plagiarism. He it was who, as a matter of pleasantry, and for

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†The Hon. John Forsyth.

the mystification of a few friends in Savannah, translated the "Lament of the Captive" into Greek verse. When this translation was exhibited, some pretended to recognize it as a fragment of Alcæus, and ignorantly suggested that to this Greek lyrical poet was Mr. Wilde indebted for the tender sentiments and truthful images which immortalized his popular poem. The wonder grew, and quite a discussion ensued in several of the journals of the period. Meanwhile a claim to the authorship of the poem was interposed by some friends of O'Kelly, who had penned the "Curse of Doneraile," and sung wildly though sweetly of the picturesque scenery of Lake Killarney and the grandeur of the Giant's Causeway. Captain Basil Hall mentioned that the Countess Purgstall read the lines to him and left him under the impression that she had composed them. "The verses had become so popular that they were set to music; and the name of Tampa,—a desolate sea-beach on the coast of Florida,—was changed into Tempe, the loveliest of the wooded valleys of Greece." Thus did the plot thicken, and manifestly to the annoyance of Mr. Wilde. It was quickly demonstrated, however, that neither O'Kelly nor the Countess Purgstall could substantiate the shadow of a claim to the authorship of this poetical gem; and, so soon as the Greek version was submitted to the criticism of competent scholars,

it became apparent that, although pure Greek, the alleged fragment of Alcæus was not Alcaic Greek. There was a total absence of the dialects which incrust the Greek poetry of the age of Alcæus.

To set the matter at rest Mr. Wilde addressed the following communication to Mr. Barclay:

“WASHINGTON, January 7, 1835.

DEAR SIR: Relying on our past acquaintance and your known urbanity to pardon the liberty I take, permit me to say, without further preface, that circumstances, which it is unnecessary to detail, concur in pointing you out as the author of a translation into Greek of some fugitive verses long attributed to, but only recently avowed by me. If you are, I am sure the task was executed only to amuse the leisure hours of a gentleman and scholar, or at most, for the sport it might afford you to mystify the learned. In the latter you have been so eminently successful, if the work is yours, that a result has been produced the reverse, no doubt, of your intention so far as respects myself. I have been stigmatized with plagiarism, and compelled, such was the importance some of my friends attached to the charge, to deny it in person. Since then an article in the Georgian of the twenty-seventh of December goes far to exculpate me from the pillage of Alcæus, and excellent reasons have been given by Greek scholars to show the piece is modern.

Nevertheless, as I have been compelled to do penance publicly, in sheets once white, for this sin of my youth, it would relieve me, somewhat, since I must acknowledge the foundling, to have no dispute about the paternity. The Greek fragment is so well executed as to deceive many of some pretensions to scholarship. I am therefore desirous of obtaining for publication, in such form as you choose, your avowal of the authorship; or, if you prefer it, your simple authority for the fact. If I am wrong in ascribing it to you, your acquaintance with the society of Savannah will perhaps enable you to inform me to whom I should address myself.

“Permit me to renew the assurance of the high respect and regard with which I have the honor to be, dear sir, your obedient servant,

RICHARD HENRY WILDE.

To ANTHONY BARCLAY, ESQ.,  
of Savannah—now in New York.”

To this letter Mr. Barclay responded :

“NEW YORK, January 24th, 1835.

My Dear Sir :

I was not apprised when I addressed you on the 9th instant, nor for some days after, that my prose translation into Greek of your beautiful ode, beginning

“My life is like the summer rose,”  
had been published; otherwise I could not at that short time have

passed over the circumstance in utter silence. It was written for individual amusement with exclusively half a dozen acquaintance in Savannah, and without the slightest intention of its going further. This assertion will account for the abundant defects, and they will vouch for its truth. I as little believed that any credit, beyond the hour of surprise among my acquaintance before mentioned, would be awarded to my crude translation, as I apprehended that any doubt could be created concerning the originality of your finished production. Metre and prosodiocal quantity were designedly disregarded; and this fact was sufficient to detect the spuriousness of the attempt, and to vindicate me from any suspicion of expecting a successful deception. If that effect has in any degree been brought about, I must repeat, (to employ your language,) that a result has been produced the reverse of my intention as far as regards yourself from whose brow, I have had good reason to believe, for the last sixteen years or more, that modesty alone detained the poetic wreath. I cannot say how extremely I regret the indiscreet publication. Truly reluctant however, as I am to come before the public, I shall feel strong inducement to be resigned, if the translator succeed in dragging his author out of concealment, and that event contribute to strip all masks and to bestow honor where honor is due.

With great truth and regard, I am  
your faithful servant,

ANTHONY BARCLAY.

Hon. RICHARD HENRY WILDE, M. C.,  
Washington, D. C."

Of the pathetic and tender sentiments which this poem contains, of the exquisite truthfulness of its images, and of the melody of its versification, nothing may be spoken save in exalted praise. In the language of another, they conspire to confer upon the author a fame which nothing so brief had previously secured even to the masters of the lyre.

In discussing the use of words conveying "a resemblance between the sound and the sense," the Hon. George P. Marsh, in his "Lectures on the English Language," says in the whole range of imitative verse he knows no line superior, perhaps none equal, to this in Wilde's celebrated poem:

"ON THAT LONE SHORE LOUD MOANS  
THE SEA."

It certainly is not excelled by those oft-quoted lines of Coleridge:

"Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean "

And now the question recurs: shall the bones of this lawyer, statesman, scholar, poet, be permitted to lie longer in an unmarked and obliterated grave in the obscure corner of

a vegetable garden? Great men are the glory of the nation, and their ashes are entitled to proper respect and reasonable care at the hands of succeeding generations. Will not the proper authorities, lifting themselves above the monotony of a present pregnant with utilitarian ideas and gravid with commercial methods, recognize the general obligation, give practical expression to a generous, ennobling sentiment, and rescue from forgetfulness the grave of this adopted Georgian who, without the adjuvatives of birth and fortune, accomplished so much in the domain of letters and of civilization?

CHARLES C. JONES, JR.

AUGUSTA, GEORGIA,  
September 24th, 1885.

RESPONSE OF A BALTIMORE LADY  
TO  
"MY LIFE IS LIKE THE SUMMER ROSE."

The dews of night may fall from Heaven  
Upon the withered rose's bed,  
And tears of fond regret be given  
To mourn the virtues of the dead;  
Yet morning's sun the dews will dry,  
And tears will fade from sorrow's eye,  
Affection's pangs be lulled to sleep,  
And even love forget to weep.

The tree may mourn its fallen leaf,  
And autumn winds bewail its bloom,  
And friends may heave a sigh of grief  
O'er those who sleep within the tomb;  
Yet soon will Spring renew the flowers,  
And time will bring more smiling hours;  
In friendship's heart all grief will die,  
And even love forget to sigh.

The sea may on the desert shore  
Lament each trace it bears away,  
The lonely heart its grief may pour  
O'er cherished friendship's fast decay;  
Yet when all track is lost and gone,  
The waves dance bright and gaily on;  
Thus soon affection's bonds are torn.

