

Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-45)

1 *Fontenoy*

(1745.)

I.

Thrice, at the huts of Fontenoy, the English column failed,
And, twice, the lines of Saint Antoine, the Dutch in vain assailed;
For town and slope were filled with fort and flanking battery,
And well they swept the English ranks, and Dutch auxiliary.
As vainly, through De Barri's wood, the British soldiers burst, 5
The French artillery drove them back, diminished, and dispersed.
The bloody Duke of Cumberland beheld with anxious eye,
And ordered up his last reserve, his latest chance to try;
On Fontenoy, on Fontenoy, how fast his generals ride!
And mustering come his chosen troops, like clouds at eventide. 10

II.

Six thousand English veterans in stately column tread,
Their cannon blaze in front and flank, Lord Hay is at their head;
Steady they step a-down the slope — steady they climb the hill;
Steady they load — steady they fire, moving right onward still,
Betwixt the wood and Fontenoy, as through a furnace blast, 15
Through rampart, trench, and palisade, and bullets showering fast;
And on the open plain above they rose, and kept their course,
With ready fire and grim resolve, that mocked at hostile force:
Past Fontenoy, past Fontenoy, while thinner grow their ranks —
They break, as broke the Zuyder Zee through Holland's ocean banks. 20

III.

More idly than the summer flies, French tirailleurs rush round;
As stubble to the lava tide, French squadrons strew the ground;
Bomb-shell, and grape, and round-shot tore, still on they marched and fired —
Fast, from each volley, grenadier and voltigeur retired.

“Push on, my household cavalry!” King Louis madly cried: 25
To death they rush, but rude their shock — not unavenged they died.
On through the camp the column trod — King Louis turns his rein:
“Not yet, my liege,” Saxe interposed, “the Irish troops remain;”
And Fontenoy, famed Fontenoy, had been a Waterloo,
Were not these exiles ready then, fresh, vehement, and true. 30

IV.

“Lord Clare,” he says, “you have your wish, there are your Saxon foes!”
The Marshal almost smiles to see, so furiously he goes!
How fierce the look these exiles wear, who’re wont to be so gay,
The treasured wrongs of fifty years are in their hearts to-day —
The treaty broken, ere the ink wherewith ’twas writ could dry, 35
Their plundered homes, their ruined shrines, their women’s parting cry,
Their priesthood hunted down like wolves, their country overthrown, —
Each looks, as if revenge for all were staked on him alone.
On Fontenoy, on Fontenoy, nor ever yet elsewhere,
Rushed on to fight a nobler band than these proud exiles were. 40

V.

O’Brien’s voice is hoarse with joy, as, halting, he commands,
“Fix bay’nets” — “Charge,” — Like mountain storm, rush on these fiery bands!
Thin is the English column now, and faint their volleys grow,
Yet, must’ring all the strength they have, they make a gallant show. 45
They dress their ranks upon the hill to face that battle-wind —
Their bayonets the breakers’ foam; like rocks, the men behind!
One volley crashes from their line, when, through the surging smoke,
With empty guns clutched in their hands, the headlong Irish broke.
On Fontenoy, on Fontenoy, hark to that fierce huzza!
“Revenge! remember Limerick! dash down the Sacsanach!” 50

VI.

Like lions leaping at a fold, when mad with hunger’s pang,
Right up against the English line the Irish exiles sprang:
Bright was their steel, ’tis bloody now, their guns are filled with gore;
Through shattered ranks, and severed files, and trampled flags they tore;
The English strove with desperate strength, paused, rallied, staggered, fled — 55

The green hill side is matted close with dying and with dead.
Across the plain, and far away passed on that hideous wrack,
While cavalier and fantassin dash in upon their track.
On Fontenoy, on Fontenoy, like eagles in the sun,
With bloody plumes the Irish stand — the field is fought and won!

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