

Aubrey De Vere (1814-1902)

2 *A Ballad of Athlone (2nd Siege);*

*or, How They Broke Down the Bridge*

[When the Jacobite war was renewed De Ginkle besieged Athlone, which was held by St. Ruth. The gallant action described in the poem only delayed the taking of the town a short while.]

Does any man dream that a Gael can fear?  
Of a thousand deeds let him learn but one!  
The Shannon swept onward broad and clear,  
Between the leaguers and broad Athlone.

“Break down the bridge!” — Six warriors rushed 5  
Through the storm of shot and the storm of shell:  
With late but certain victory flushed,  
The grim Dutch gunners eyed them well.

They wrench’d at the planks ’mid a hail of fire:  
They fell in death, their work half done: 10  
The bridge stood fast; and nigh and nigher  
The foe swarmed darkly, densely on.

“O, who for Erin will strike a stroke?  
Who hurl yon planks where the waters roar?”  
Six warriors forth from their comrades broke, 15  
And flung them upon that bridge once more.

Again at the rocking planks they dashed;  
And four dropped dead; and two remained:  
The huge beams groaned and the arch down-crashed;  
Two stalwart swimmers the margin gained. 20

St. Ruth in his stirrups stood up, and cried,

“I have seen no deed like that in France!”  
With a toss of his head, Sarsfield replied,  
“They had luck, the dogs! ’Twas a merry chance!”

O many a year upon Shannon’s side 25  
They sang upon moor and they sang upon heath  
Of the twain that breasted that raging tide,  
And the ten that shook bloody hands with Death!

(From *The Book of Irish Poetry*. Ed. with an Introduction  
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