

Aubrey De Vere (1814-1902)

5 *The Bier that Conquered; or, O'Donnell's Answer*

A. D. 1257.

Land which the Norman would make his own!  
(Thus sang the Bard 'mid a host o'erthrown  
While their white cheeks some on the clench'd hand propp'd,  
And from some the life-blood scarce heeded dropp'd)  
There are men in thee that refuse to die, 5  
And that scorn to live, while a foe stands nigh!

I.

O'Donnell lay sick with a grievous wound:  
The leech had left him; the priest had come;  
The clan sat weeping upon the ground,  
Their banners furl'd and their minstrels dumb. 10

II.

Then spake O'Donnell, the king: "Although  
"My hour draws nigh, and my dolours grow;  
"And although my sins I have now confess'd,  
"And desire in the land, my charge, to rest,  
"Yet leave this realm, nor will I nor can, 15  
"While a stranger treads on her, child or man.

III.

"I will languish no longer a sick man here:  
"My bed is grievous; build up my Bier.  
"The white robe a king wears over me throw;  
"Bear me forth to the field where he camps — your foe, 20  
"With the yellow torches and dirges low.  
"The heralds his challenge have brought and fled:  
"The answer they bore not I bear instead.  
"My people shall fight my pain in sight,  
"And I shall sleep well when their wrong stands right." 25

IV.

Then the clan to the words of their Chief gave ear,

And they fell'd great oak-trees and built a bier;  
Its plumes from the eagle's wing were shed,  
And the wine-black samite above it they spread  
Inwoven with sad emblems and texts divine, 30  
And the braided bud of Tirconnell's pine,  
And all that is meet for the great and brave  
When past are the measured years God gave,  
And a voice cries "Come" from the waiting grave.

V.

When the Bier was ready they laid him thereon; 35  
And the army forth bare him with wail and moan:  
With wail by the sea-lakes and rock abysses;  
With moan through the vapour-trail'd wildernesses;  
And men sore wounded themselves drew nigh  
And said, "We will go with our king and die;" 40  
And women wept as the pomp pass'd by.  
The sad yellow torches far off were seen;  
No war-note peal'd through the gorges green;  
But the black pines echo'd the mourners' keen.

VI.

What said the Invader, that pomp in sight? 45  
"They sue for the pity they shall not win."  
But the sick king sat on the Bier upright,  
And said, "So well! I shall sleep to-night: —  
"Rest here my couch, and my peace begin."

VII.

Then the war-cry sounded — "Bataillah Aboo!" 50  
And the whole clan rush'd to the battle plain:  
They were thrice driven back, but they form'd anew  
That an end might come to their king's great pain.  
'Twas a people not army that onward rush'd;  
'Twas a nation's blood from their wounds that gush'd: 55  
Bare-bosom'd they fought, and with joy were slain;  
Till evening their blood fell fast like rain;  
But a shout swell'd up o'er the setting sun,  
And O'Donnell died for the field was won.

So they buried their king upon Aileach's shore; 60

And in peace he slept; — O'Donnell More.

(From *The Sisters, Inisfail, and Other Poems*. Dublin:  
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