

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY RUTH A. GALLAHER

VOL. XXIX

ISSUED IN JULY 1948

NO. 7

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## Maverick Poem

When King George VI of Great Britain made his usual address to the nations of the British Commonwealth on January 1, 1940, he closed with a quotation which began, "I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown,' and he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.' " At once there rose a world-wide chorus of questions as to the name of the author. No one seemed to know, but search revealed that the poem was from a small volume entitled *The Desert*, published some twenty-five years earlier by a commonplace spinster teacher of English, Minnie Louise Haskins.

There have been many single famous poems. Why a person should be able to write one popular poem and no others of equal interest has never been fully explained. For one thing, such writers



seem to have been rather nonentities who engaged in routine work — to provide necessities for themselves and families — they had little time to give to poetry. Possibly only unusual emotion could break down the inhibitions of prosaic, everyday tasks. Perhaps the lack of immediate recognition discouraged the muse already doubtful of its welcome.

Whatever the reason for the one-poem men and women, it appears that their works often lead an uncertain existence, claimed first by one aspirant and then by another. It is not surprising that this happens. Since the author is unknown, his poem is often published in an obscure newspaper, a book printed in a small edition, or in a collection. No copyright is secured and he who reads may copy. Editors guess at the author.

One of the most famous and most controversial of these "maverick" poems is "There Is No Death". When this poem was written, where it was first published by John Luckey McCreery, and how the name of Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton (Owen Meredith) came to be associated with it seem to be lost in the fog of memory and misstatements. There are even inconsistencies concerning McCreery's name and the place of his burial. One account says that *John Luckey McCreery* was buried in Glenwood Cemetery,



Washington, D. C. A Dubuque newspaper says he was buried in the Linwood Cemetery at Dubuque. A report from the Glenwood Cemetery at Washington states that James L. McCreery, aged seventy, was buried there in September, 1906.

The old saying, "The less light, the more heat", most certainly applies to the story of this poem, for controversy has raged about it for many years. McCreery, who seems to have been a sincere but indefinite sort of person, gave three different accounts of the origin of "There Is No Death"; Bulwer Lytton gave none at all. Perhaps he never heard that the poem was attributed to him. Possibly he would not have been pleased if he had known.

John Luckey McCreery was born in Monroe County, New York, on December 31, 1835. For a time he worked on a newspaper at Dixon, Illinois, and in April of 1859 he bought *The Delaware County Journal* at Delhi, subject to a mortgage. He ran this paper until the close of 1864, when, apparently, he lost out to the mortgage and moved to Dubuque where he secured a position on the *Herald*. When the question of his authorship of "There Is No Death" was raised, the rival newspaper, the Dubuque *Times*, ridiculed his claim and asserted that Bulwer Lytton was the author.



In reply, McCreery printed his first account of the origin of the poem in the *Herald* of February 2, 1869. He wrote the verses in the fall of 1859, he said, and published them in his own paper. An anonymous someone, who signed himself E. Bulmer, copied the poem and sent it to the "Independence Temperance Offering" at Chicago. This E. Bulmer, whose first name McCreery says was Eugene, is the unidentified villain of this story. Then, according to McCreery, *The Farmers' Advocate*, "a Wisconsin agricultural paper", reprinted "There Is No Death", and the editor concluding that "Bulmer" was a misprint for "Bulwer", changed it accordingly. E. Bulwer, of course, suggested Edward Bulwer Lytton (Owen Meredith) and the stage was set for the long-drawn-out controversy. As a final argument, McCreery offered to pay \$100 to any person who could prove that "There Is No Death" had ever appeared in any published work of Bulwer Lytton or any other writer. There were no claimants. On the other hand, no evidence of the publication of the poem by McCreery in any of these papers has been found. A paper known as *The Farmers' Advocate* was published in Chicago from 1859 to 1863 but the only copy of this paper located does not contain the poem.

When Jacob Rich took over the Dubuque



*Times* about 1870, McCreery became a member of the editorial staff and remained with that paper some five years. It is said that M. C. Woodruff, who took full charge of the *Times* in 1875, objected to McCreery's temperance editorials.

The poem, meanwhile, went its way, often under the aegis of the sophisticated English poet. When Harper and Brothers printed "There Is No Death" in one of its school readers in 1870, Lord Lytton was given as the author. McCreery protested and was aided by at least one fellow Iowan, J. D. Edmundson, and by John Kennedy, a former resident of Delaware County. Their testimony seems to have convinced the Harper editors for the reader issued five years later credited the poem to McCreery.

A new era in the controversy began about 1880. At that time McCreery, probably at the suggestion of William B. Allison, was appointed to a clerical position in the Department of the Interior at Washington, D. C., and in 1883 he issued his first and only volume of poems — *Songs of Toil and Triumph*. The first poem in the book was "There Is No Death" and in the "Introduction" McCreery gives a second version of its origin.

According to this account he wrote the poem in the fall of 1862 and sent it to *Arthur's Home Magazine* in which it was published in July, 1863.



This publication is one of the few authenticated facts in the controversy. This version is also supported by Joseph B. Swinburne, who lived in the McCreery home at the time the poem was written. According to his recollection, McCreery was superintendent of schools at the time. McCreery was elected to that office in October, 1861, serving two years. The later items in the story are much the same as in his 1869 account.

The appearance of his copyrighted volume seems to have strengthened McCreery's claim to the authorship of "There Is No Death". An edition of Peale's *Popular Educator and Cyclopedia of Reference*, published in 1885, included it among the selection of poems and credited it to J. L. McCreery and in June, 1889, *Lippincott's Magazine*, in a series of questions on literary matters, made the statement that McCreery was the author of "There Is No Death".

But the controversy flared up again in 1892. T. S. Parvin printed the poem in the *Iowa Masonic Annual Souvenir* under McCreery's name and was caustically criticized by the editor of the *American Tyler* of Detroit who characterized McCreery's claim as a "Bad Piece of Plagiarism". In unbrotherly irritation the Michigan editor declared: "we are astonished that he should seek to foist upon intelligent people as 'Iowa's Great-



est Poem', the well-known work of Lord Edward Bulwer Lytton, written thirty years ago."

After some correspondence and an unclaimed offer by McCreery of \$1000 to anyone who could prove that Lord Lytton ever published the poem under his name, John H. Brownell, the editor of the *American Tyler*, in April, 1893, wrote "The Amende Honorable", in which he apologized for his attack on Parvin and spoke of McCreery as "the man who has been 'Charlie Ross'd' out of the sweetest child of sacred song ever born in America." In spite of this apology, however, Brownell's *Gems from the Quarry and Sparks from the Gavel*, published in 1893, gives ten stanzas of "There Is No Death" and credits them to Bulwer Lytton. Sidney Smith, editor of the short-lived *Iowa Masonry*, defended Parvin and McCreery's claim and in December, 1892, wrote, "It ["There Is No Death"] does not appear in any of Lytton's works . . . and his son writes to an enquirer that he never saw it among any of his father's writings".

This incident seems to have produced McCreery's third version of the story of his famous poem which appeared in *The Annals of Iowa* for October, 1893. It is longer and much more detailed than either of the earlier stories. McCreery told how he drove slowly across the country in



Delaware County one Saturday afternoon. The roads were muddy and the journey was not finished until after dark. He was worried about his future and his mind moved over the course of his life. His father had been a Methodist minister and the son had been reared to be a preacher, but he says he had "become skeptical regarding many points of dogma regarded as essential by orthodox churches." Unable to preach, he had turned to newspaper work but the establishment was heavily mortgaged and he realized he was not an efficient businessman. He had no money with which to buy a farm and was not physically fit for manual labor. As the stars came out his troubled mind was soothed by the majesty and tranquillity of the heavens. The first four lines of "There Is No Death" came into his mind. The next morning he wrote several more stanzas, and later sent the poem to *Arthur's Home Magazine* which had previously printed three or four of his poetical efforts.

McCreery relates that after the poem had been published he reprinted it in *The Delaware County Journal* and sent a clipping to a friend, John H. Moore, a foreman on a newspaper at Dixon, Illinois, who reprinted the verses. There Eugene Bulmer, or whoever was represented by that name as a *nom de plume*, saw it and sent it to the *Farmers' Advocate* at Chicago as part of an article



on "Immortality". Since Bulmer wrote the article the readers apparently assumed that he wrote the poem also. Comes then the keen-minded editor of a Wisconsin paper who knew of Edward Bulwer Lytton. Correcting typographical errors being a part of any editor's job, he changed E. Bulmer to E. Bulwer and the popularity of the English poet did the rest. McCreery added:

"Meanwhile the poem has encircled the world. I have received papers containing it printed in nearly every state of the Union; in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Canada; and even one from Australia. It has gone into dozens of school books, and been incorporated in scores of miscellaneous collections of poetry. It has been quoted, in full or in part, five times that I know of in Congress; on the last day of January, 1880, I had the pleasure of sitting in the strangers' gallery of the House of Representatives, in Washington, D. C., and hearing the Hon. Mr. Coffroth, member of Congress from Pennsylvania, in his oration on the death of the Hon. Rush Clark, member of Congress from Iowa, quote a portion of it (credited to Lord Lytton, as usual), which thus became embalmed in the Congressional Record."

Once in print, any error tends to perpetuate itself. As late as July 27, 1928, the Des Moines *Tribune-Capital* printed seven stanzas of "There



Is No Death" and gave E. Bulwer Lytton as the author. McCreery, however, seems now to be assured of recognition as the author of "There Is No Death", but there are still gaps in the story. Who, for example, was E. Bulmer?

The poem which made John Luckey McCreery famous was not, however, otherwise an asset to him. He says that in 1868 he was recommended as a secretary or stenographer on President U. S. Grant's staff. His sponsor read the poem to the general, who apparently did not care for it — at least he decided he wanted business ability and not poetry in his office.

John L. McCreery died on September 7, 1906. He was survived by his wife, Loretta Knapp McCreery, and two of their three daughters. His tombstone in Glenwood Cemetery, Washington, D. C., bears his name, the dates of his birth and death, and the first four lines of the poem which had given him so many heartaches and thousands of bereaved mourners so much solace and comfort:

There is no death! The stars go down  
To rise upon some other shore,  
And bright in heaven's jeweled crown  
They shine for evermore.

In his *Famous Single Poems*, published in 1923 by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Burton E. Stevenson says: "No doubt other tombstones



scattered up and down the land bear these same lines, for they were once unbelievably popular".

In 1926 the Delhi Woman's Club placed a bronze tablet on the site of the home where McCreery wrote his one famous poem. It bears his name, the dates of his life, 1835-1906, and the final stanza of "There Is No Death".

And ever near us though unseen,  
The dear immortal spirits tread;  
For all the boundless universe  
Is life — there are no dead!

It is a curious anomaly that John Luckey McCreery, insecure and inefficient in material affairs, should have had this vision of the permanence of life. Perhaps his own insecurity made him cling unconsciously to the faith in an eternity of existence. His indefinite recollections of the origin of the poem are not necessarily indications that his claim was questionable. He was an unassuming man and neither his actions nor his poems were matters of great importance. He himself said: "at the time I was not expecting to go down to posterity very far". Yet, like all humble persons, he desperately wanted what was his. The struggle for recognition was bitter, but through it John Luckey McCreery achieved the recognition denied to him in other fields.

RUTH A. GALLAHER