

## William Allingham: Cold Words Hiding Life in their Veins.

Allingham the poet came into being "as by chance"; his gift of song burst forth "without search,"<sup>1</sup> and when he registered in his *Diary* in 1849 a discussion on the writing of poetry with Coventry Patmore, Allingham was simply recording his own experience:

*he [Patmore] for consciousness, I for unconsciousness: he thinks a poet ought to know exactly what he wants to do and how to set about it; I am for knowing all one can, but also for poetising without conscious reference to rules and precedents.*<sup>2</sup>

However, after the publication of his first volume *Poems* (1850) and the disappointment that ensued as a result of the public's indifference and the harsh reviews of some critics, Allingham embarked on a long and tedious job of revising many of these poems. His decision to go over the poems became a mania which caused him to tamper with a large number and in the process quite spoil them. At the same time, that early shock induced him to revise his opinion regarding poetry. This can be seen in an interesting poem, "The Shooting Star", which first came out in the *Athenaeum* in 1857<sup>3</sup> (a period of frustration for Allingham who by now had published three volumes without any success). On the surface, the poem deals with a couple watching a shooting star and suddenly, in a moment of illumination, discovering that they are in love. The fact of the star brings the lovers sudden recognition in a fleeting moment, but at the same time this realization is "long delay'd": love had been fermenting, awaiting the right moment. The same procedure applies to the composition of poetry: even though a poem appears to originate spontaneously, a great deal of thinking has gone into the process; the poem shoots up, as it were, as suddenly and unexpectedly as a meteor, but only when all aspects of it are in full harmony and the poet in full control of his material.

Allingham spent three-quarters of his life in Ireland; thus it is natural that his poetry should spring from the Irish surroundings. After all, his motto remained "Let me sing of what I know,"<sup>4</sup> and what he knew was the wild sea-coast, the little folk, the little town of Ballyshannon, the lonely landscape, ruined abbeys, the stars, leprechauns and fairies. That "lonely west coast was the house of his dreams/And his visions"; it was the place of his "nurture" and his "song-gift."<sup>5</sup> Allingham had a distinct gift for music. The *Diary* notes that he sang in fairs, and his interesting essay "Irish Ballad Singers and Irish Street Ballads" which first appeared in 1852 in *Household Words* shows his deep interest in the Irish ballad and his regret that so many beautiful ballads are "perishing yearly, by twos and threes, or lingering only with an old nurse, and an old piper, here and there."<sup>6</sup>

Allingham, then, was primarily an Irishman and an Irish poet. Many of his friends in London viewed him as such and welcomed him into their circle simply because he was uniquely different. In 1862, Georgiana Burne-Jones reported:

*The arrival of Allingham in London this autumn was a great addition to our circle, for he liked and was liked by so many different people. And he brought with him a breath of the wild Irish loughs and mountains when he told us that he had been wandering amongst them quite lately, with a barelegged little goat-herdess of fourteen or fifteen years for his guide, who was very intelligent and chatty in two languages, English and Irish, but had never heard of London.*<sup>7</sup>

In the composition of his poetry Allingham looked outside into the natural world of Ballyshannon and its surroundings; he celebrated what he saw and revelled in the sight of maids, singers, fiddlers, dancers, fishermen, boats, fairy tales and leprechauns