



Beans & Bacon

The Tale of Toby Toothpick

*Come, Miss Thalia, you and I have been Confounded strangers for these 10 years past; In fact your laughing face I've never seen, But your sad sister, glooming, o'er me cast
A shred of her black mantle – I'm as lean
As though upon the earth I were the last
Of living creatures; with the fields all tinder, And the vast world one lifeless, sapless cinder.*

*Now, Ma'am, you know it is a downright bore, When any moping, melancholy fellow,
Who looks eternally as though he wore
Death written on his forehead, strives to tell a Tale of deep passion, or attempts to soar*

*Into fair fancy's regions, while his yellow
And half-closed eyeballs throw a jaundiced blight O'er all and everything within his sight.
But, Ma'am, I need not tell you for you know it, And everybody knows it – or they should –
No gloomy fellow ever was a poet.
Give me the men who every ill withstood,*

*Who, wounded, bleeding, still disdained to show it – They who are ever in a laughing mood
Where laughter is acceptable – and then,
Though proud as Lucifer, behold the men*

*By whom the veil of mystery is riven,
Who handle hearts as playthings, and could wing Their flight from shades of misery to heaven! Then
come, dear Thaly; I intend to sing – Provided always that your aid be given –
Of Mister Toby Toothpick: once the king
Of jolly wits within a country town,
But now 'hard set', 'done up' and 'broken down'.*

*Three days had passed, and not a bit of victual Had Toby tasted, while his teeth were grinding Between
his meeting jaws a watery spittle!
And dreadful was their eager grate on finding Nothing to gnaw upon! Ah, Miss! 'Twould set all
Creation's teeth on edge, if angst were binding Each month to two poor pennyworths of bread – Which
(for a month, poor soul!) was all he had*

*Each week to live on – sometimes scarcely that!
A month had passed since he had left his lodging, And he was friendless, houseless, knew not what On
earth would now become of him; for judging From all he hoped, or knew, he might have sat Down on
the earth and died sans farther trudging. But Toby, who disdained a beggar's name,
Was made of the right stuff – a thorough game;*

*Who would have braved the Devil, or been driven As far beneath the earth in want and pain
As ever that black fellow was from heaven,
Ere he would beg or scurvily complain.*

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*Nay though his eyes were sunk, and his heart riven, And death before him danced, he would disdain
To shed a tear; for the poor slave is no man,
Who would whine o'er his sufferings like a woman.*

*Poor Toby wore a coat that once was black,
Upon his feet a slipper, and a shoe.
At hide and seek the winds played through his back – I mean through tattered coat and spare ribs too:
And then his unexpressibles! Good lack!
They, with his stocking heels, said “How d’ye do?” To the unfeeling elements, from a score
Of mouths that witness to his colour bore.*



*It was not far from Cambridge – Toby sat
Vainly endeavouring with a crooked pin
To tack the broken brim upon his hat
By the wayside; half thinking 'twas a sin
For gouty knaves who could not walk
with fat, To live at all, when lo, he looked
within*

*A piece of paper near him, and behold:
Out peeped a heavenly angel – good as
gold!*

*A 20 shilling Bank of England note!
Some may be glad, but Toby was ecstatic;
He leapt with grateful rapture, and forgot
His shoulders and knee joints were still
rheumatic – “Begone dull care” was
echoed from his throat, Though lying-out
had made him quite asthmatic, And as he
tripped off, now resolved to dine,
He saw the King of Prussia on a sign.*

*'Twas on a Saturday, and by the clock
Just five and 20 minutes after seven;
When Toby entering, like a general
spoke;*

He called for ale, and straight the ale was

*given; A crust and cheese – 'twas ate; a pipe to smoke; He quaffed his ale, and felt at once in heaven.
Within the kitchen, many a country lout*

*Gazed on his weekly score chalked round about.
The bread and cheese were swallowed in a minute, And made a hungry man more hungry still;
So Toby's stomach like a starving linnet,
Chirped melancholy music; while to swill*

*The cold home-brewed which had no substance in it, But whetted appetite. Resolved to fill
Each craving crevice quite, he bade them spread For him a table, and prepare a bed.*

*Now Toby; though his garments were but mean, Had something of the gentleman about him;
His manners plainly said that he had been Something before Dame Fortune chose to flout him. And by
the way, the landlady had seen*

*The Bank's sure passport, and his change had brought him; Which, when the others saw, and he looked
darkly;
They whispered: "Zounds! I'll bet it's Captain Barclay!"*

*"Sir, supper's ready," said the smiling dame, And she was round and ruddy; plump and fat, Clean, tidy,
rather bustling, as became
Her age and occupation. Toby's hat*

*Was in his hurry left – for he thought shame To keep it on his fine head while he sat;
She took it up; but lo! The crooked pin From her soft hand tore half an inch of skin;*

*And on the floor down fell the brimless crown.
Toby blushed black as night at the disaster, Ashamed the wretched article to own,
While loud mine hostess bawled for sticking-plaster. He, sweating with vexation, stooping down,*

*Took up his hat, and walked a little faster Towards the supper room than he intended – But beans and
bacon this misfortune mended.*

*And to a hungry man, a glorious sight The King of Prussia parlour did afford; In fact, the very essence
of delight,
And epicurean glory crowned the board;*

*A goodly glass of brandy sparkly bright,
A pint of ale, much more we might record, But last not least, adorning his tweens, Appeared the bacon
and the smoking beans.*

*By threes, by fours, the beans go one and all, Slice after slice, the bacon disappears; "Hunger to him,"
cried Toby, "who would fall On 20 shillings and to spend them fears – Aye, and enjoy them! Now I think
I shall*

*Try the old lady's Glo'ster." And the tears
Dropped down his cheeks in consummate enjoyment, His whole soul rapt in sublime employment*

*Of satiating hunger! Of the cheese
He ate till he was satisfied, and then
The ale he drank, and held his sides at ease; (His vest had long been buttonless) and when He had
sipped-off the brandy – "If you please You may remove the cloth and fill again
This glass, and bring the papers," Toby cried, But nothing save bare plates mine hostess spied.*

*Cheese, beans and bacon, save a crust of bread There was no solitary fragment left,
All, all were vanished, or devoured, or fled! Wondering where she stood, awhile of speech bereft, Stared
most expressively; then shook her head; Thinking no doubt, it was a kind of theft*

*To pay for supper when she set it down,
And then devour the whole for half-a-crown;*

*Ale, brandy; all inclusive. Toby said,
She looked when she beheld that all was done Like one whose reason for a time had strayed,
Stammered as she had neither lost nor won Most pitifully stupid; but it made
No difference to Toby: When the sun
Did him next morning from his slumbers waken He still was dreaming of his beans and bacon.*

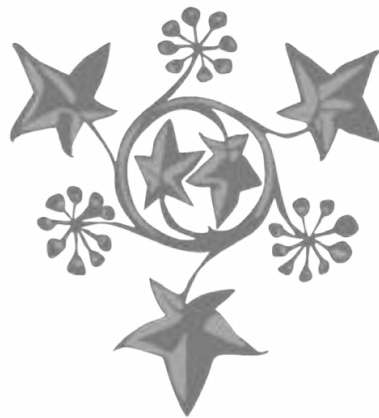
*While yet he rubbed his eyes and lay at rest, Blessing the mem'ry of the man unknown
– But yet of architects the first and best – Who first invented beds to sleep upon,*

*Yea while half dreaming, feeling almost blest,
He heard mine hostess in a fearful tone
Exclaim – “The note is forged! Well! No! I never! – He’s yet in bed, transport the
wretch forever!”*

*“Forged!” shouted Toby, springing from his bed, He seized his trousers, high the
window threw, Leaped to the ground and all but naked fled! But Toby’s flight was
vain, for ere he two*

*Short miles had run, he back again was led; And bade to hope and liberty adieu.
In vain he vowed his innocence; and he Fourteen long years was sent beyond the sea.*

*There still of beans and bacon did he dream – And every slice became a bristled boar,
While from his heart he fancied blood to stream, As with their tusks his heaving
breast they tore. But there at length did Fortune on him beam, Nor long the convict’s
hated garb he wore, Wealthy he grew – and as his wealth increased, Each year he
held a beans and bacon feast!*



Beans and Bacon companion piece.

- The Enthusiast

Wilson had always been a poet and promoted himself as something of an expert on the subject, a view shared by other contemporary comment of the time. He lived at a time when literature or “prose” was starting to be become respectable as an art form. Poetry having been seen as art and prose as rather common or vulgar. Indeed Walter Scott was so worried about the possible damage to his reputation that his early novels were published anonymously or under a pseudonym, Jedediah Cleishbotham being one of the more imaginative ones.

As well as publishing his own poetry where he could, before his return to Berwick , Wilson had been a rooming lecturer in poetry. In the days before television there was often an audience to be found in regional towns for knowledgeable speakers. The Manchester Times reports of on one such lecture at the Mechanics Institution over 3 evenings of the 12-14th April 1831.

He is described as an elegant and absorbing public orator. “The lecturer is not engaged in his work, before he ... convinces every listener both of his skill and of his power.” “In his recitals, his sudden transitions from the pathetic to the stern, the tragic to the comic, the rapid to the slow, the soft to the loud, - accompanied by every variety of action, look and expression of feeling, can only be equalled by some of our best dramatic performers”.

He is also considered to be knowledgeable on his subject, complimented by his own writing skill. “He has the art of at once seizing that which gives prominence and character to the poetry and the genius of the writer, and of striking off the whole in two or three bold sentences, illustrating the same with some daring and often beautiful imagery...”

The report also tells us that though a manuscript lies before the lecturer, composed of leaves apparently of all sizes, they are apparently only referred to occasionally and act as “a reserve rather than a spring from whence he is taking in constant supplies”.

Once he had settled in Berwick, we would no longer have the opportunity to give these lectures, but the notes would no doubt form the backbone of his essay on poetry that opens his publication “The Enthusiast”.

This was published from Berwick by him in 1834 and opened with his essay on poetry. It then contained his rather long poem called “the Enthusiast” about love a love affair in a setting that sounds a lot like the banks of the Tweed near Berwick , leaving one wondering if there is an element of personal input as he had a teenage dalliance with girl from Gainslaw Hill some 4 miles or so upstream from Berwick. The poem was set out in 2 Canto’s and ran to some 40 pages. The poem would also be republished in “The tales of the Borders”, but under the name of “Edmund and Helen; A metrical tale”, which in latter editions under Leightons editorship, became part of “The Minstrels Tales”.

The initial chapter of the book is Wilson’s essay on poetry, which he explains: “There are few subjects so little understood and unduly appreciated as poetry”. However he is also quick to comment that one needs to be careful what one considers to be poetry. “I believe that out of every hundred verses that are written. Ninety-nine will be found guiltless of possessing even the shadow of poetry.”

He next describes the attributes of a “true poet”, who amongst other attributes “he must grapple as with the power of an archangel, and play with the feebleness of a worm. He must grasp a mountain, and peep into a molehill.”

On poetry’s place in the scheme of life he comments “History is the mere body of events poetry is their soul”.

There then follows a rather odd section when he suggest Napoleon’s military manoeuvres are poetry in motion. Though he takes care to end the section praising Scots heroism in case anyone should think him too much of a Francophile!

We then get a run through the poets of note starting with Chaucer, as England produced no poets of note before him. This covers Shakespeare to Milton, with special mention to Scots’ poets, though he notes no two write with the same dialect or use of language. He gives particular praise for Berwickshire’s poets, including Thomas Lermont of Earlston , more commonly known as “Thomas the Rhymer” and Drummond of Hawthorndean who “first introduced sweetness and elegance”.

He sums up by stating the opinion that poets are rather special and different people. “Genius is a wild, an unsettled, and a wayward thing” and that as a result, “Poets, like paintings, to be seen to advantage, ought in general to be viewed from a distance”

The book also contained a further 31 poems of varying length and interest. Some were romantic. “A women’s love”, recites his appreciation of the love of a good women and “The temperate man’s song” explains to his drinking companions why he would rather return home to his wife than carry on drinking with them.

“It’s true I like a social gill,
A friendly crack wi’ cronies,

But I like my wife better still.”

“The Suicide” is somewhat darker as the title suggests. As is, “Thy will be done”, subtitled, “written during the prevalence of cholera in Berwick”;

“Death like a silent spirit roams
Around from door to door!

No warning voice proclaims- he comes! He glanceth and ‘tis o’er!”

It tries to make sense of the random choice of victims and seeks God to “spare us from thy wrath”.

The poem we have chosen to republish in this revival edition is however entitled “Beans & Bacon”. A humorous tale of fortune and misfortune and back again. The gist of the story being that a tramp, called Toby Toothpick, picks up a scrap of paper that turns out to be a £20 note when he unfolds it. Making the most of his good luck, he books into the first Inn he finds and orders himself a large plate of beans and bacon, accompanied by a generous quality of ale. He then retires to the comfort of a warm bed to be awoken by a commotion down stairs in the morning. He soon realises the cause for this is that his note has used turned out to be a forgery and he’s in trouble. He jumps out the window in his underpants and tries to make good his escape up the road but is soon apprehended. He is taken before the court and the Judge will have none of his excuses and story of how he came across the note in question. He is dually sentenced to transportation to “distant shores”. A brutal punishment, but one that was in reality often given by judges sympathetic to the plight of minor “criminals” whose actions where not heinous, but the only other option open to them was often the death sentence.

This however proved the making of the tales hero. It was a chance to reset his life and have a fresh start in a new place without the baggage of his previous precarious existence. In due course he thrived and became a successful and wealthy man of the colonies. In recognition of the event that changed the course of his life, which he still saw as his good fortune, he celebrated the anniversary of the day he found the counterfeit note with a large banquet for all his friends and staff, at which he of course served “Beans & bacon”!

Wilson wrote the preface to *The Enthusiast* in December 1833 and it was published in 1834 by William Tait of 78 , Princes Street. (Presumably Edinburgh). He wrote of the success of the publication in his correspondence to Everett, reporting in January 1834 that he was sending 12 copies to him by coach. He also reported having had good feedback from the likes of Lord Howick .

He also wondered whether it would be a financial as well as critical success.

“The copies I have sent out on order on Saturday and today amount to about sixty pounds but it puzzles me to know how I am to get the money collected being from nearly three hundred individuals in different parts of the country, but all respectable”

Very few copies of this publication now seem to exist. The project has so far only come across two copies in existence. One copy is held by the Literary and Philosophical society of Newcastle and is part of their book collection in their rather wonderful library near the Central Station. Well worth a visit. The other copy is held by the Berwick Borough archives. A rather special edition, as it has an inscription gifting the book to his brother James and an ink self-portrait taped onto the inside front cover. This copy was also owned by George Beattie of Amble, one of Wilson's few descendants from his sister Isabella, whose family gifted it to the town.

Wilson also clearly at this stage had plans to start publishing his Tales of the Borders as the family copy also has an advert for their forthcoming publication at the back! Though it is possible this was bound in at a later date...

Background by Andrew Ayre.