



Alfred B. Smeat.

#### ALFRED BILLINGS STREET.

**A**MERICANS have always been desirous that their country should attain literary distinction. For decades the sarcastic query, "Who reads an American book?" rankled in the public mind. It is, therefore, almost inexplicable that an American poet, whose claims to high distinction have been freely and generously recognized by critical readers of the Old World, should be comparatively forgotten in his own land. Yet such has been the fate of Alfred B. Street. No anthology of American poetry, worthy of the name, omits from its pages such masterpieces as "The Gray Forest Eagle," "The Lost Hunter" or "The First Settler," but of the man himself and of the mass of his poetry the reading public of to-day is profoundly ignorant.

Alfred Billings Street was born in Poughkeepsie, December 18, 1811, and died in Albany, June 2, 1881. He came of distinguished Revolutionary stock. His father was General Randall S. Street, and on the paternal side he traced his ancestry through a number of learned scholars and eminent divines of Connecticut back to one of the most ancient families in England. The original seat of the family was in Sussex, where there still stands the old, gray, weather-beaten "Street Church," mentioned in the Domesday Survey. One of the poet's ancestors was Sir Thomas Street, Baron of the Exchequer and Justice of the Common Pleas in the reign of Charles II. His maternal grandfather was Major Andrew Billings, who married a daughter of James Livingston. Thus the poet was connected with two families prominent in Colonial history. Mr. Street's life was uneventful. He was a poet, a man of books, a lover of nature, and the record of days, apart from his poems, can be put into brief span. His youth was spent in Monticello, N. Y. The wild and sylvan solitudes of Sullivan county fostered that minute intimacy with natural phenomena that marks everything from his pen. Henry T. Tuckerman, in "The Democratic Review," brings out this side of the poet's work. "Street is a true Flemish painter," he says, "seizing upon objects in all their verisimilitude. As we read him, wild flowers peer up from among brown leaves; the drum of the partridge, the ripple of waters, the flickering of autumn light, the

sting of sleety snow, the cry of the panther, the roar of the wind, the melody of birds, and the odor of crushed pine-boughs, are present to our senses."

Mr. Street was admitted to the bar, but law had little attraction for him. In 1848 he was made State Librarian, and thereafter until his death he held this congenial association with books. He published a number of volumes of poetry, most of them pictures of forest and field, mountain and stream. But there were also strong and vigorous narrative poems, like "The Burning of Schenectady," and "Frontenac." He almost instantly won flattering recognition, both at home and abroad. Benjamin Disraeli paid tribute to his "originality and poetic fire," and even the cynical and dyspeptic Poe admitted in his "Marginalia" that "as a descriptive poet, Mr. Street is to be highly commended." Charles T. Hoffman, recurring to Tuckerman's figure, says that "Mr. Street is the Teniers of American poets," and S. A. Allibone attempts to fix his place on Parnassus as follows: "Perhaps it would be correct to say that his rank among American poets is the same as that generally assigned to Dryden among English poets—one of the first of the second class."

Surely America is not so rich in literary genius that it can afford to neglect so rarely endowed a poet as this.

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