General James R. O’Beirne, ’53, A.M., LL.D.

On February 17 General O’Beirne passed to the reward of a long life, spent in the service of his country and his God. His distinguished career had been related in the secular press; but for us at Fordham there remains the duty, an imperative and loving duty, of recording our special share in the universal grief the death of this great man has caused. For General O’Beirne dearly loved his college. He was courageous in his defense of the good name of his old teachers, and his soldierly desire for fair play found him outspoken in his praise of those who nourished him in their schools, and led him to realize and appreciate to the full the benefits that come with Catholic training, and the consolations that accrue to one devotedly attached to Mother Church—as he was.

General James Rowan O’Beirne was born in the parish of Elfin, County Roscommon, Ireland, and at his death was well past the scriptural limit. His father was Michael Horan O’Beirne, and his mother Eliza Rowan. Like so many thousands of his countrymen, he was destined to fill out his career in a land far from his native heath. And so, at an early age, we find him journeying to the United States—to make his home in New York. Here he was sent to the Jesuits for his schooling, and at Fordham completed his education. It is on record that in his college days he was found possessed of the same steady, ambitious qualities that were to distinguish him in after life, both on the battlefield and in the civic walks of men. That he was chosen valedictorian of his class, followed naturally from his highly successful completion of his courses, combined with his noble traits of character which marked him out as a leader.

The storming of Fort Sumter awoke in the Fordham College lad the desire to give himself to the cause of the Republic, and with others of his fellows he made haste to enroll under the old flag, and do what in him lay for the land which had welcomed him to its shores.

It was in 1861, when a private in the Seventh Regiment of the New York National Guard, that he entered the army. From the first he was conspicuous for his bravery and for his genius in commanding. Promotion followed rapidly, and he passed through the various grades, until the rank of Brigadier-General was conferred on
him. At Chancellorsville he was wounded so badly that he was put on reserve duty, and assigned by Secretary of War Stanton as Provost-Marshal, during General Jubal Early's investment of Washington in 1864. He was the military officer on duty at the deathbed of President Lincoln; and, being detached by the Secretary of War to take up the pursuit of the assassins of the President in Maryland and Virginia, he was in command when they were traced and found.

Those who knew the General and his love of country will not be surprised to learn that he prized especially among his many decorations the Military Medal of Honor, voted him by Congress for gallant conduct at the Battle of Fair Oakes—where, according to general orders of that engagement, he was “particularly distinguished for courage and activity.” Another treasure very dear to him was his decoration by the Venezuelan Government at Caracas with the bust of the Liberator, Simon Bolivar, in 1889.

His career in Washington for some time after the war was passed between his official duty as Assistant Marshal and Register of Wills of the District and editor and proprietor of the Washington Gazette. On returning to New York he became Immigration Commissioner, and thereafter held important positions both in civic and Grand Army life. He was Grand Marshal of the Grand Army of the Republic Posts of New York, and President of the Yonkers Electric Light Company, while it was one of his keenest memories that he was one of the organizers and Marshal of the parade of the Catholic schools and colleges at the Columbian Celebration in 1892.

The General's devotion to the land of his adoption only intensified his appreciation for the Isle that saw his birth. He was always deeply interested in Ireland's welfare, and strove with characteristic energy to make her claims known throughout the world. For years a member of the Irish Parliament Fund Association and President of several Irish benevolent associations, he was especially active in the clouded period that came with the disruption of the Land League; and nothing could daunt him in his efforts to organize the United Irish League, when chaos came with the post-Parnell period. In basements, in schoolrooms, in lofts—every way he summoned his countrymen and baded them be loyal to the cause they had at heart. This forceful pleading of the soldier often compelled his countrymen to rally to the support of the land they loved, and made the General an acknowledged leader in all the patriotic movements that had Ireland for their object.

It may be permitted here to say a word in a Fordham journal of the General's deep, abiding affection for his own college. His love for it began as a mere boy and grew with the years. It was touching to observe him, as he declined into old age, discussing about the days long gone, and the teachers whom he knew then; to hear him recite incidents of his career here, contrasting the Fordham of today with Fordham in its struggling beginning. Not a meeting of the clubs and societies connected with the College would be missed if it were possible to attend; and this proud, inspiring figure at such gatherings was a source of pride to us all and an inspiration. We see him, in his regular visits to Fordham, coming up the lawn, soldierly of step, head thrown back, eye straight ahead. We watch him as he greets his fellows of the College, nearly all his juniors; his old-fashioned courtesy, his extreme kindness, his unfailing charity to all, young and old. And, if to some religious function he came, he seemed, as he knelt erect in chapel and read from his old, ante-bellum treasure of a prayer-book, a leader all through, one who was brave enough to lead in battle for his country and humble enough to acknowledge another Leader Who is over all. Oh! how he loved Fordham and how he loved his Church! He spoke as if our College had done more for him than make him fit to be great among his countrymen; it made him fit to stand forth as a champion of his faith.

Blessed with a sound classic training, accomplished in all the niceties of life; gifted with a mind that was quick and receptive; a lover of the fine arts, he was one who championed nought but the right, just as he ever stood forth the gentleman, whom to know was to admire, and whom to admire was to love. His manly beauty was enhanced by a grandeur of soul that reflected goodness. Never the advocate of the mean, the shams of the world troubled him, and artificiality in any form was to him unbearable. Dishonesty in business or professional life was a mystery he never could solve, and it was to him a constant source of wonderment that a man could deceive his fellows.

It has been said that the good of one's life is known only after one's death, since the truly great man conceals it during life. So it was with General O'Beirne. Ever unmindful of the ingratitude that it is the lot of us all to suffer, he went about doing the things that count—if not here, at least in Heaven. Some of the good he did was made manifest while he lived, for the recipients of his bounty
would have it so. But the countless deeds of charity, his love for the poor, his concern for the unfortunate, were known only to the few, and only his death has permitted us to know how he had lived his life for the welfare of others.

But, crowning all his soldier's courage, crowning his grand civic life, his deep affection for his College, his charity towards all, was his grand spirit of Catholic faith. He loved his Church and believed in Her, hoped in Her, even as he died lovingly in Her arms. No wonder, then, that he was so indefatigable in following her teaching, that he took such intense interest in every movement that tended to bring men to know Christ, that so often he induced an erring brother to come unto God's friendship.

There is reason for the sorrow that fills many hearts to-day; there is cause why his friends should mourn, why those nearest and dearest to him should be deep in sorrow. A brave soldier, a Christian of consummate courage, a loving father, has gone from among men. To the students of Fordham, his life will read its lessons, faithful in all things, loyal to the extreme, patriotic, charitable, prayerful, constant to all the teachings of his Church, a man, every inch a man. He looks down from the walls of the old dining-hall at Fordham upon a new generation, and when they gaze on his manly, handsome face and think of the soldier, the man, and what he strove for and won, they will be consoled and helped and made better, because of General O'Beirne. For he was a soldier indeed and a leader, not alone one who gave his all to the land he loved; but a soldier and a leader under the standard of the Cross, an ardent worker in the army of his Captain, Christ. "May he rest in peace."