
Poetry and Nature and the Church

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

The week before us brings the observance of both natural wonder and literary saints!

First, the natural wonder: At exactly 10:29 p.m. on Monday, September 22, we here in Atlanta will observe the Autumnal Equinox. (That's Eastern Standard Time; that moment will be Tuesday, September 23, at 2:29 a.m., at Universal Coordinated Time). At that moment, the sun's rays will be shining at a direct ninety degree angle upon the earth's equator, not at a summer angle that causes longer days, nor at a winter angle that brings longer nights). On that day, our night will theoretically be as long as our day. Thus the word "equinox" means "equal night;" the night's length is equal to the day's length.

Then, on Friday, September 26, many in the Christian Church will observe the feast day of Lancelot Andrewes. Andrewes was a truly outstanding scholar of the Anglican tradition, and a bishop of the Church of England, known especially for his facility with languages. He was one of the acknowledged leaders among the scholars who translated the King James Version of the Bible. (Kurt Vonnegut cited his translation of the first few verses of the 23rd Psalm as proof that Andrewes was "the greatest writer in the English language."). T.S. Eliot quoted one of Andrewes' Christmas Day sermons as the opening lines of his poem, "The Journey of the Magi." And in Walker Percy's great novel, *Lancelot*, the main character is named "Lancelot Andrewes Lamar."

Ah! Thus I propose, this week, to turn to poetry and the church. For the next two weeks of the Dean's Forum, I will present two very different poets. In two weeks (on September 28), I will discuss the life and poetry of John Donne, surely one of my heroes, not least because he was both a poet and a dean of a cathedral (the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London 1621–1631). In my best days, I long to match both his poetry and his deanship!

But, first, I turn to a poet who was a more keen observer of the natural world, and a poet more closely related to Georgia. This week, I will review the life and work of Sydney Lanier, often recognized as Georgia's greatest poet. His themes are mildly religious, but his images surely bring forth the glory of God.

Here is a sample of Sydney Lanier's style:

*Oh, what is abroad in the marsh and the terminal sea?
Somehow my soul seems suddenly free
From the weighing of fate and the sad discussion of sin,
By the length and the breadth and the sweep of the marshes of Glynn.
Ye marshes, how candid and simple and nothing-withholding and free
Ye publish yourselves to the sky and offer yourselves to the sea!
Tolerant plains, that suffer the sea and the rains and the sun,
Ye spread and span like the catholic man who hath mightily won
God out of knowledge and good out of infinite pain
And sight out of blindness and purity out of a stain.
As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies*

*In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt the marsh and the skies:
By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God:
Oh, like to the greatness of God is the greatness within
The range of the marshes, the liberal marshes of Glynn.*

Do you know that poem? Join us at the Dean's Forum, this Sunday at 10:10 a.m., where we will hear "The Marshes of Glynn" in its entirety, and learn more about one of Georgia's greatest poets.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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