

Classic Poetry Series

Alfred Comyn Lyall

- poems -

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Alfred Comyn Lyall(4 January 1835 – 11 April 1911)

Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall was born on 4th January 1835, in Surrey, England. He was educated first at the prestigious Eton College and later at Haileybury College.

In 1856 he joined the Indian civil service and served in many capacities until his retirement in 1887. He also fought during the Mutiny of 1857-58 and was honoured for this. Subsequently he held a number of high-ranking roles including Commissioner of Nagpur, Commissioner of West Berar, the Governor-General's agent in Rajputana, and (from 1878 to 1881) Foreign Secretary to the Government of India. During this period he helped negotiate peace and a monarchy in Afghanistan.

Lyall returned to England in the 1887 and served on the India Council for four years. During his time both in India and England Lyall earned a number of honours.

Throughout his life Lyall also worked as a writer. As a biographer his chosen subjects were Warren Hastings and Lord Dufferin. As a historian he was acclaimed for his imaginative as well as philosophical insights into the course of Indian history. He also produced a number of volumes of poetry. These

literary achievements brought him advanced degrees, a D.C.L. from Oxford (1889) and an L.L.D. from Cambridge (1891), a fellowship at King's College Cambridge(1893), and membership in the British Academy (1902), among other honours.

He married Cora Cloete of Cape Town in 1863 and they had four children.

He died of a heart attack on April 10, 1911.

Awards

He was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire (KCIE) in 1887, Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) in 1881 and Knight Grand Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire (GCIE) in 1896.

Literary

His Verses Written in India was published in 1889. He wrote a number of other

books on poetry. He wrote also books on Indian history, Warren Hastings, and Alfred Lord Tennyson. His literary achievements brought him advanced degrees, a D.C.L. from Oxford (1889) and an LL.D. from Cambridge (1891), an Honorary Fellow of King's College, Cambridge (1893), and membership in the British Academy (1902).

A more comprehensive list of his known publications is given below:

Asiatic Studies, Religious and Social: First Series. (John Murray. London, 1882)

The Rise and Expansion of the British Dominion in India. (John Murray. London, 1893)

Warren Hastings (English Men of Action Series). (Macmillan & Co. London, 1889)

Verses Written in India. (Kegan Paul, Trench. London, 1889)

Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social in India, China & Asia: Second Series. (John Murray. London, 1899)

Tennyson (English Men of Letters series). (Macmillan & Co. London, 1902)

The Life of the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, 2 vols. (John Murray. London, 1905)

Etudes sur les mœurs religieuses et sociales de l'Extrême-Orient. (French translation of Asiatic Studies, First & Second Series: Fontemoing, Paris. 1907–1908)

Studies in Literature and History. (published posthumously by John Murray. London, 1915)

Meditations Of A Hindu Prince

ALL the world over, I wonder, in lands that I never have trod,
Are the people eternally seeking for the signs and steps of a God?
Westward across the ocean, and Northward across the snow,
Do they all stand gazing, as ever, and what do the wisest know?

Here, in this mystical India, the deities hover and swarm
Like the wild bees heard in the treetops, or the gusts of a gathering storm;
In the air men hear their voices, their feet on the rocks are seen,
Yet we all say, "Whence is the message, and what may the wonders mean?"

A million shrines stand open, and ever the censer swings,
As they bow to a mystic symbol, or the figures of ancient kings;
And the incense rises ever, and rises the endless cry
Of those who are heavy laden, and of cowards loth to die.

For the Destiny drives us together, like deer in a pass of the hills;
Above is the sky, and around us the sound of the shot that kills;
Push'd by a power we see not, and struck by a hand unknown,
We pray to the trees for shelter, and press our lips to a stone.

The trees wave a shadowy answer, and the rock frowns hollow and grim,
And the form and the nod of the demon are caught in the twilight dim;
And we look to the sunlight falling afar on the mountain crest,—
Is there never a path runs upward to a refuge there and a rest?

The path, ah! who has shown it, and which is the faithful guide?
The haven, ah! who has known it? for steep is the mountain side,
Forever the shot strikes surely, and ever the wasted breath
Of the praying multitude rises, whose answer is only death.

Here are the tombs of my kinsfolk, the fruit of an ancient name,
Chiefs who were slain on the war-field, and women who died in flame;
They are gods, these kings of the foretime, they are spirits who guard our race:

Ever I watch and worship; they sit with a marble face.

And the myriad idols around me, and the legion of muttering priests,
The revels and rites unholy, the dark unspeakable feasts!
What have they wrung from the Silence? Hath even a whisper come

Of the secret, Whence and Whither? Alas! for the gods are dumb.

Shall I list to the word of English, who come from the uttermost sea?

"The Secret, hath it been told you, and what is your message to me?"

It is nought but the wide-world story how the earth and the heavens began,
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How the gods are glad and angry, and a Deity once was man.

I had thought, "Perchance in the cities where the rulers of India dwell,

Whose orders flash from the far land, who girdle the earth with a spell,

They have fathom'd the depths we float on, or measur'd the unknown main—"

Sadly they turn from the venture, and say that the quest is vain.

Is life, then, a dream and delusion, and where shall the dreamer awake?

Is the world seen like shadows on water, and what if the mirror break?

Shall it pass as a camp that is struck, as a tent that is gathered and gone

From the sands that were lamp-lit at eve, and at morning are level and lone?

Is there nought in the heaven above, whence the hail and the levin are hurl'd,

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But the wind that is swept around us by the rush of the rolling world?

The wind that shall scatter my ashes, and bear me to silence and sleep

With the dirge, and the sounds of lamenting, and voices of women who weep.

Alfred Comyn Lyall

Sîva

<i>Mors Janua Vitae.</i>

I am the God of the sensuous fire
That moulds all Nature in forms divine;
The symbols of death and of man's desire,
The springs of change in the world, are mine;
The organs of birth and the circlet of bones,
And the light loves carved on the temple stones.

I am the lord of delights and pain,
Of the pest that killeth, of fruitful joys;
I rule the currents of heart and vein;
A touch gives passion, a look destroys;
In the heat and cold of my lightest breath
Is the might incarnate of Lust and Death.

If a thousand altars stream with blood
Of the victims slain by the chanting priest,
Is a great God lured by the savoury food?
I reckon not of worship, or song, or feast;
But that millions perish, each hour that flies,
Is the mystic sign of my sacrifice.

Ye may plead and pray for the millions born;
They come like dew on the morning grass;
Your vows and vigils I hold in scorn,
The soul stays never, the stages pass;
All life is the play of the power that stirs
In the dance of my wanton worshippers.

And the strong swift river my shrine below
It runs, like man, its unending course
To the boundless sea from eternal snow;
Mine is the Fountain—and mine the Force
That spurs all nature to ceaseless strife;
And my image is Death at the gates of Life.

In many a legend and many a shape,

In the solemn grove and the crowded street,
I am the Slayer, whom none escape;
I am Death trod under a fair girl's feet;
I govern the tides of the sentient sea
That ebbs and flows to eternity.

And the sum of the thought and the knowledge of man
Is the secret tale that my emblems tell;
Do ye seek God's purpose, or trace his plan?
Ye may read your doom in my parable:
For the circle of life in its flower and its fall
Is the writing that runs on my temple wall....

Let my temples fall, they are dark with age,
Let my idols break, they have stood their day;
On their deep hewn stones the primeval sage
Has figured the spells that endure alway;
My presence may vanish from river and grove,
But I rule for ever in Death and Love.

Alfred Comyn Lyall

Studies At Delhi, 1876

<i>I.--The Hindu Ascetic.</i>

Here as I sit by the Jumna bank,
Watching the flow of the sacred stream,
Pass me the legions, rank on rank,
And the cannon roar, and the bayonets gleam.

Is it a god or a king that comes?
Both are evil, and both are strong;
With women and worshipping, dancing and drums,
Carry your gods and your kings along.

Fanciful shapes of a plastic earth,
These are the visions that weary the eye;
These I may 'scape by a luckier birth,
Musing, and fasting, and hoping to die.

When shall these phantoms flicker away?
Like the smoke of the guns on the wind-swept hill,
Like the sounds and colours of yesterday:
And the soul have rest, and the air be still.

<i>II.--Badminton.</i>

Hardly a shot from the gate we stormed,
Under the Moree battlement's shade;
Close to the glacis our game was formed,
There had the fight been, and there we played.

Lightly the demoiselles tittered and leapt,
Merrily capered the players all;
North, was the garden where Nicholson slept,
South, was the sweep of a battered wall.

Near me a Musalmán, civil and mild,
Watched as the shuttlecocks rose and fell;

And he said, as he counted his beads and smiled,
"God smite their souls to the depths of hell."

Alfred Comyn Lyall

Theology In Extremis: Or A Soliloquy That May Have Been Delivered In India, June, 1857

<i>"They would have spared life to any of their English prisoners who should consent to profess Mahometanism, by repeating the usual short formula; but only one half-caste cared to save himself in that way." -- Extract from an Indian newspaper.</i>

MORITURUS LOQUITUR.

Oft in the pleasant summer years,
Reading the tales of days bygone,
I have mused on the story of human tears,
All that man unto man had done,
Massacre, torture, and black despair;
Reading it all in my easy-chair.

Passionate prayer for a minute's life;
Tortured crying for death as rest;
Husband pleading for child or wife,
Pitiless stroke upon tender breast.
Was it all real as that I lay there
Lazily stretched on my easy-chair?

Could I believe in those hard old times,
Here in this safe luxurious age?
Were the horrors invented to season rhymes,
Or truly is man so fierce in his rage?
What could I suffer, and what could I dare?
I who was bred to that easy-chair.

They were my fathers, the men of yore,
Little they recked of a cruel death;
They would dip their hands in a heretic's gore,
They stood and burnt for a rule of faith.
What would I burn for, and whom not spare?
I, who had faith in an easy-chair.

Now do I see old tales are true,

Here in the clutch of a savage foe;
Now shall I know what my fathers knew,
Bodily anguish and bitter woe,
Naked and bound in the strong sun's glare,
Far from my civilized easy-chair.

Now have I tasted and understood
That old world feeling of mortal hate;
For the eyes all round us are hot with blood;
They will kill us coolly -- they do but wait;
While I, I would sell ten lives, at least,
For one fair stroke at that devilish priest

Just in return for the kick he gave,
Bidding me call on the prophet's name;
Even a dog by this may save
Skin from the knife, and soul from the flame;
My soul! if he can let the prophet burn it,
But life is sweet if a word may earn it.

A bullock's death, and at thirty years!
Just one phrase, and a man gets off it;
Look at that mongrel clerk in his tears
Whining aloud the name of the prophet;
Only a formula easy to patter,
And, God Almighty, what can it matter?

"Matter enough," will my comrade say
Praying aloud here close at my side,
"Whether you mourn in despair alway,
Cursed for ever by Christ denied;
Or whether you suffer a minute's pain
All the reward of Heaven to gain."

Not for a moment faltereth he,
Sure of the promise and pardon of sin;
Thus did the martyrs die, I see,
Little to lose and muckle to win;
Death means Heaven, he longs to receive it,
But what shall I do if I don't believe it?

Life is pleasant, and friends may be nigh,

Fain would I speak one word and be spared;
Yet I could be silent and cheerfully die,
If I were only sure God cared;
If I had faith, and were only certain
That light is behind that terrible curtain.

But what if He listeth nothing at all
Of words a poor wretch in his terror may say?
That mighty God who created all
To labour and live their appointed day;
Who stoops not either to bless or ban,
Weaving the woof of an endless plan.

He is the Reaper, and binds the sheaf,
Shall not the season its order keep?
Can it be changed by a man's belief?
Millions of harvests still to reap;
Will God reward, if I die for a creed,
Or will He but pity, and sow more seed?

Surely He pities who made the brain,
When breaks that mirror of memories sweet,
When the hard blow falleth, and never again
Nerve shall quiver nor pulse shall beat;
Bitter the vision of vanishing joys;
Surely He pities when man destroys.

Here stand I on the ocean's brink,
Who hath brought news of the further shore?
How shall I cross it? Sail or sink,
One thing is sure, I return no more;
Shall I find haven, or aye shall I be
Tossed in the depths of a shoreless sea?

They tell fair tales of a far-off land,
Of love rekindled, of forms renewed;
There may I only touch one hand
Here life's ruin will little be rued;
But the hand I have pressed and the voice I have heard,
To lose them for ever, and all for a word?

Now do I feel that my heart must break

All for one glimpse of a woman's face;
Swiftly the slumbering memories wake
Odour and shadow of hour and place;
One bright ray through the darkening past
Leaps from the lamp as it brightens last,

Showing me summer in western land
Now, as the cool breeze murmureth
In leaf and flower -- And here I stand
In this plain all bare save the shadow of death;
Leaving my life in its full noonday,
And no one to know why I flung it away.

Why? Am I bidding for glory's roll?
I shall be murdered and clean forgot;
Is it a bargain to save my soul?
God, whom I trust in, bargains not;
Yet for the honour of English race,
May I not live or endure disgrace.

Ay, but the word, if I could have said it,
I by no terrors of hell perplexed;
Hard to be silent and have no credit
From man in this world, or reward in the next;
None to bear witness and reckon the cost
Of the name that is saved by the life that is lost.

I must be gone to the crowd untold
Of men by the cause which they served unknown,
Who moulder in myriad graves of old;
Never a story and never a stone
Tells of the martyrs who die like me,
Just for the pride of the old countree.

Alfred Comyn Lyall