Edward Harrington
- poems -

Edward Harrington(28 September 1896 – 28 May 1966)

Edward Phillip Harrington was an Australian poet and short story writer, the last of the bush balladists.

Early Life

Edward "Ted" Harrington was born to Phillip Henry and Margaret nee O'Brien on the 28th September 1895. His early youth was spent in the Shepparton area where his father worked a small wheat growing property at Pine Lodge Creek.

It was here that his sister, Mrs Reilly, recalls Ted composing his first poem at the age of nine as part of a competition between the two siblings to see who could write the most impressive verse. His sister recalled that Ted immediately set to work and produced a five stanza poem which "...was a much better piece than mine even though I'd copied one out of a school reader."

Ted's skill with the pen was soon recognised by one of his teachers, Mr McKernan, at Shepparton East State School. Mr McKernan sent off some of the young poets work to the Department of Education and the offer of a partial scholarship was made for the then, Bendigo College. However, Ted's parents were unable to pay for his board and soon after the family moved to a small selection at Wanalta, not far from Colbinabbin.

Phillip Harrington expected that his sons would assist on the farm but as his sister recalls, for Ted, there were always other priorities... "He'd leave the horse and plough in the middle of the paddock so he could write down what was in his mind straight away, and if father found them or came upon a half milked cow or a half-sown crop he'd come storming into the kitchen. Our mother would simply say she'd called Ted in to have a cup of tea."

The young Ted attended the Wanalta School - referred to by that other local writer Joseph "Tom Collins" Furphy as "...the schoolhouse on the plain..." - and followed in Furphy's lead by contributing his poems to the Rushworth Chronicle under the pseudonym "A Wanalta Schoolboy". And when he left, at age fourteen, his formal education was complete although, as his once father commented, "He was always reading!".

The Hills of Whroo

But, as for many young men in the district at the time, Ted's life was to be changed irrevocably with the onset of war. The Rushworth Chronicle of March 23rd, 1917 offers the first known publication of a poem by Ted Harrington under his own name. A recollection of youthful adventures it reads in part:

"Far below us in a hollow
Slumber'ing in the morning haze,
Lay the quaint, old mining township,
Relic of the Roaring Days.

Through its empty streets we cantered
And our reins we never drew,
For our thoughts were in the future,
Riding o'er the hills of Whroo."

The poem's publication included the editors footnote "The above lines were composed by Private ngton, the third son of Mr and Mrs p. Harrington of WandIra to enlist for active service." What prompted Ted, who is remembered by all who knew him as sensitive and thoughtful man, and who, himself, in his later life remarked on the brutality of war, to enlist is perhaps contained in the final lines of The Hills Of Whroo:

"Aye; 'tis verdant green, old comrade,
But - your grave is verdant, too!
And we'll go no more together,
Riding o'er the hills of Whroo."

Ted joined the Fourth Light Horse Division and saw service in Palestine. He was in the Charge of Beersheba, the siege of Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley campaign (Ess-Alt) and the final Battle of Damascus. It would be easy to suggest that Ted hardened himself to the horrors of war but in a letter to Miss J.G. Shain he reveals that the thoughtful poet and experienced soldier went through everything together:

"A couple of nights before the charge of Beersheba (31st October 1917) Joe McGrath recited Henry Lawson's 'Star of Australia' at a concert at Tel El Tara. Joe was rather a rough elocutionist but it impressed me greatly. When the charge occurred I knew how well Lawson had visioned it. Poor old Joe, the rough elocutionist had his leg blown off."

After The War

It would be fair to say that, like many returned servicemen, for many reasons, Ted was never really able to settle back into his old life again. At the end of the war he returned to the family selection but his health had suffered greatly during the war and he spent siix months at the Caulfield Military Hospital before being trained as a plasterer as part of the Repatriation Department's Vocational Guidance Scheme. He moved between the city and the country staying with various family members and even working as a rouseabout and drover...but, as always, he continued writing.

By the 1930s he was a regular contributor to the Bulletin and helped to found a number of literary groups including the "Bread and Cheese Club" and the "Lawson Society". He also published three volumes of his poetry - all now unfortunately out of print - and a number of Poetry Society pamphlets. All of this took place at a time when a poets skill was widely appreciated and the 'bush balladeer' from Wanalta was greatly respected by his contemporaries and critics alike.

But as 'new' poetry styles emerged Ted found himself part of a generation of writers forgotten by many, even in literary circles. A striking -and ironic - example, both of Ted's enduring talent and the 'changing of the guard' that took place in popular tastes, occurred in 1954 when the new musical "Reedy River" premiered in Melbourne. In the audience was the writer of the Australian classic "Power Without Glory", Frank Hardy, and he was amazed to hear that the song "My Old Black Billy", which was included in the show, had been attributed as a traditional Australian bush ballad. Hardy arranged for Ted, who had written the song less than 15 years before, to attend the last night of the musical's record breaking eight month run in Sydney where he was called onto the stage and receive his due applause.

As with much of Ted's work the origins of the song hark back to the Wanalta selection and and his war years. As Hardy reported: "Suddenly Harrington remembered the shack he lived in as a boy, with a tall gum tree just outside the door. Many swagmen used to pass that way and his mother would nearly always have the oven full of scones. Many of the swaggies were shy and his mother would say 'Ted - tell him to come in' and he would go out and get them ....."

The thing that stood out most in Ted's memory was the inevitable old black billy - the most conspicuous part of the swagman's kit - 'plain and sensible' ..." And in Harrington's own words: "Even in Palestine with the light horse the 'old black billy was considered the most important part of a soldier's kit, even more so than

his rifle. At every stop the chaps would be scurrying all over the place looking for sticks to build a fire and boil a billy"

Ted's contribution during World war Two included working in a munitions factory and for the Department of Aircraft Construction where a young lady he worked with, now living in Nagamble, remembers him fondly as a 'lovely, quiet gentleman' that she would sit with during her lunch breaks.

Ted retired on a T.P.I. pension and continued to write regularly for newspapers across the state, the Bulletin, the Catholic Leader and the Labor Call. But the war never left him and with the onset of Vietnam he published a poem in pamphlet form" arguing against committing Australian troops to what he believed was a foreign conflict. The poem was titled "This Is Not Home Defence" and the copy in the State Library includes the words, in Ted's hand, "My contribution to' the Vietnam controversy 26.7.1965."

A colleague of his wrote at this time: "He is in and out of Heidelberg, his diet seems to consist of mainly capsules, tablets and brandy. Melbourne weather is not the best climate for his war disabilities." Less than a year later, almost fifty years after his enlistment at Rushworth, Edward 'Ted' Harrington passed away.

He never recovered from his war service mentally. physically or spiritually and retained a certain bitterness, that other ex-serviceman in all three wars have written of, that the society he returned to transformed itself into something that he did not feel he had fought for. But, commenting on father's recollections of his workmate John Dunn - the last surviving member of Ben Hall's bushranging gang - Ted reveals a little of the personal philosophy that may have allowed him to reconcile his experiences of war with his life afterwards - "There's a spirit of goodness even in things evil, perhaps it is the ~ beginning of wisdom to recognise this."

In remembrance...

In remembrance of Ted and those who served:
"We answered to the call to arms, unquestioning and blind,
We trusted to the promises of those we left behind.
We gave our lives ungrudgingly. we did not flinch nor quail,
Strong in the splendid faith we held that justice must prevail,
And as we drew our latest breath in sorrow and in pain,
This faith upheld us to the last: "We did not die in vain."

From "The Dead Come Home" by Edward Harrington

Hills Of Whroo

'Far below us in a hollow
Slumber'ing in the morning haze,
Lay the quaint, old mining township,
Relic of the Roaring Days.
Through its empty streets we cantered
And our reins we never drew,
For our thoughts were in the future,
Riding o'er the hills of Whroo.'
'Aye; 'tis verdant green, old comrade,
But - your grave is verdant, too!
And we'll go no more together,
Riding o'er the hills of Whroo.'

Edward Harrington

Lone Pine

Lone Pine! Lone Pine! Our hearts are numbly aching
For those who come no more,
Our boys who sleep the sleep that knows no waking,
Besides the Dardan's shore.
Through all the years, with glory sad and sombre,
Their names will deathless shine;
No bugle call can wake them from their slumber:
Lone Pine! Lone Pine!
They did not quail, they did not pause or ponder,
They counted not the odds;
The order came, the foe were waiting yonder,
The rest was with the gods.
Forth from their trenches at the signal leaping,
They charged the Turkish line,
And death charged too, a royal harvest reaping,
Lone Pine! Lone Pine!
Nought could withstand that onrush, backward driven,
The foemen broke and fled.

Edward Harrington

Morgan

When Morgan crossed the Murray to Peechelba and doom
A sombre silent shadow rode with him through the gloom.
The wild things of the forest slunk from the outlaw's track,
The boobook croaked a warning, "Go back, go back, go back!"
It woke no answering echo in Morgan's blackened soul,
As onward through the darkness he rode towards his goal.

An evil man was Morgan, a price was on his head;
The simple bush-folk whispered his very name with dread;
Before the fierce Dan Morgan the bravest man might quake-
A cold and callous killer, he killed for killing's sake. .
Past swamp and creek and gully, and settler's lone abode,
Towards the station homestead the grim Dan Morgan rode.

And still that hooded horseman that Morgan could not see,
Watched by the wild bush-creatures, rode close beside his knee.
Before them in a clearing a drover's campfire burned:
The phantom rode with Morgan, and turned when Morgan turned.
And loud the boobook's warning came on the cold night air,
"Go back, go back, Dan Morgan. Beware, beware, beware!"

He reached the station homestead, into the hall he strode,
And on his evil features, the flickering lamplight glowed.
"Into one room!" he thundered. Bring me a glass of grog!
If any disobey me I'll shoot him like a dog!"
With pistols cocked and ready, dark-eyed and beetle-browed-
Before the famous outlaw the bravest hearts were cowed.

All night with loaded pistols he dozed and muttered there,
All night the evil shadow stood close behind his chair.
The brave Scotch girl McDonald, a lass who knew no fear,
Slipped out unseen by Morgan to warn the homesteads near.
And in the hours of darkness, before the break of dawn,
Around the fierce Dan Morgan the fatal net was drawn.

Day broke upon the Murray, the morning mists were gone,
The magpies sang their matins, the river murmured on.
When Morgan left the homestead and neared the stockyard gate
He heard the boobooks warning, and turned but turned to late -

For Quinlan pressed the trigger as Morgan swung around,
And sent the grim bushranger blaspheming to the ground.

So fell the dread Dan Morgan in Eighteen sixty-five,
In death as much unpitied as hated when alive.
He lived by blood and plunder, an outlaw to the end;
In life he showed no mercy, in death he left no friend.
And all who seek to follow in Morgan's evil track
Should heed the boobook's warning: "Go back, go back, go back!"

Edward Harrington

The Bush Rangers

Four horseman rode out from the heart of the range,
Four horseman with aspects forbidding and strange.
They were booted and spurred, they were armed to the teeth,
And they frowned as they looked at the valley beneath,
As forward they rode through the rocks and the fern -
Ned Kelly, Dan Kelly, Steve Hart and Joe Byrne.

Ned Kelly drew rein and he shaded his eyes -
'The town's at our mercy! See yonder it lies!
To hell with the troopers!' - he shook his clenched fist -
'We will shoot them like dogs if they dare to resist!'
And all of them nodded, grim-visaged and stern -
Ned Kelly, Dan Kelly, Steve Hart and Joe Byrne.

Through the gullies and creeks they rode silently down;
They stuck-up the station and raided the town;
They opened the safe and they looted the bank;
They laughed and were merry, they ate and they drank.
Then off to the ranges they went with their gold -
Oh! never were bandits more reckless and bold.

But time brings its punishment, time travels fast -
And the outlaws were trapped in Glenrowan at last,
Where three of them died in the smoke and the flame,
And Ned Kelly came back - to the last he was game.
But the Law shot him down (he was fated to hang),
And that was the end of the bushranging gang.

Whatever their faults and whatever their crimes,
Their deeds lend romance to those faraway times.
They have gone from the gullies they haunted of old,
And nobody knows where they buried their gold.
To the ranges they loved they will never return -
Ned Kelly, Dan Kelly, Steve Hart and Joe Byrne.

But at times when I pass through that sleepy old town
Where the far-distant peaks of Strathbogie look down
I think of the days when those grim ranges rang
To the galloping hooves of the bushranging gang.

Though the years bring oblivion, time brings a change,
The ghosts of the Kellys still ride from the range.

Edward Harrington

The Dead Come Home: Excerpt

'We answered to the call to arms, unquestioning and blind,
We trusted to the promises of those we left behind.
We gave our lives ungrudgingly. we did not flinch nor quail,
Strong in the splendid faith we held that justice must prevail,
And as we drew our latest breath in sorrow and in pain,
This faith upheld us to the last: 'We did not die in vain.'

Edward Harrington

The Gentle Hint

The old man sat upon his swag his eyes were red and bleared.
I doubt he'd had a wash for days or even combed his beard.
He cadged my pouch and filled his pipe and calmly blew a cloud
'Some blokes ain't got no pride' he said, 'but I was always proud.

Some time ago I humped me swag along the Lachlan side
A blazing drought had hit the land and all the stock had died.
One night a good bit after dark I reached a country town;
Pulls up outside the local hall and flings me bluey down.

A dance was going on inside, a crowd was on the floor,
So I 'itches up me pants a bit and mooches in the door.
Some tarts was taken round the grub; I thinks I'm just in time;
A cup of tea will do me good; them sandwiches look prime.

But all at once the head serang, a great big hulking brute,
Strides across the floor at me and landed me a beaut.
He never said what made him narked or what he'd done it for
Just simply hits me good and hard, and knocks me out the door.

I landed fair upon me back. I got a nasty jar
And I thought just how he weren't polite, I wondered who 'e are.
I thought per'aps he meant no harm, so I 'itches up me pants
And makes me mind up come what would, I'd take another chance.

I mooches in the door again. They're cartin' round the sweets.
Cream puff and buns 'n rainbow cakes and other fancy eats.
I'm just reaching out me dook when, strike me blue and blind,
One feller grabs me in the front, another from behind.

They swings me like a bag o' chaff and shouted one, two, three
And then they laughs and holler 'Go', and it was go for me.
I hurtled out into the night and lands upon a stump
(Just put yer 'and behind me ear, you still can feel the lump)

That settled me; my oath it did; they'd hurt me in me pride;
And I decided there and then I wouldn't go inside.
I knew I wasn't welcome there, I saw it clear as print;
Some blokes ain't got no pride at all – but I can take a hint!

Edward Harrington

The Kerrigan Boys

By jove it's hot on the track today, my flannel is soaked with sweat.
I think I'll sit in the shade a bit and wait for the sun to set.
I know of a decent camping place by the river beyond the town,
And I'd rather carry my swag through there after the sun goes down.

A touch of pride, well perhaps it is, though I haven't much cause for pride.
It's sixteen years to a day almost, since old man Kerrigan died.
Sixteen years and his place is sold and the fortune he left us spent,
For the road down hill is an easy road and that was the way we went.

Kerrigan, that was our father's name, was one of the tough old sort.
And he held by graft as he held by God, and he hated drink and sport.
We lads were fond of a bit of fun though he kept us under the rein,
And we had to bow to the old man's will, though it went against our grain.

He was kind enough in his hard old way, but we had to earn our keep,
Driving horses and milking cows, branding and shearing sheep.
No wonder we bucked a bit at times, for you know what youngsters are,
We mustn't dance at the local hall or drink in Mulligan's bar.

Well, those were the orders the old man gave, but we did it just the same,
Jack was two years younger than I, so I was the more to blame.
But I've often thought had he been less hard and left us a bit more free
It might have been better for him perhaps, and better for Jack and me.

The old man dropped in the yard one day where we had the weaners penned.
We picked him up and we carried him home but we knew that it was the end.
The neighbours gathered from miles around he hadn't a single foe,
And the crowd that stood by the open grave spoke well of the man below.

We grieved a lot for the old man's death though he left us wealthy men;
If we had not known what he meant to us we realized it then.
Our only sister had died at birth and our mother was long since dead,
And we found that we were the only heirs when the old man's will was read

We were just a couple of country lads; we'd never been off the farm,
We'd been held in check from our boyhood up by the weight of the old man's arm.
Good in the saddle and fair with our fists with a touch of the old man's pride,

But the neighbours muttered and shook their heads when old man Kerrigan died.

Hard and all as the old man was for years he had kept a stud.
For the love of the horse for the horses sake is strong in the Irish blood.
But breeding was only a hobby with him a sort of a harmless craze,
Though I'd often thought that he had his fling way back in his younger days.

We got mixed up with a racing crowd and started to go the pace.
Forgot the sound of the old man's voice and the frown on his rugged face.
For the road down hill is and easy road though it ends in a swift descent,
We were only youngsters, a reckless pair, and that was the way we went.

We staked for a win on the Chester colt on the strength of a trail he showed.
But someone got to the boy on top, we knew by the race he rode.
He lost ten lengths and he finished last it was useless to make a fuss,
For the men we met in the racing game were far too cunning for us

We backed him again in the Greytown Cup and he won by half the straight,
But we left our cash in the bookies bags, for he failed to draw the weight.
We cursed the jockey and we cursed the horse, and we sold him there and then.
We'd had enough of the racing game and the ways of racing men.

We could have got out of our troubles still if we put our hands to the plough,
But the life of leisure and cards and drink had got the grip on us now.
You may call it flashness or call it pride or simply a want of sencse,
But the publicans and auctioneers grew wealthy at our expense.

We sat and drank in Mulligan's pub and gambled the whole night long.
We dealt in cattle and dealt in sheep and most of our deals went wrong.
As long as the banks would cash our cheques we didn't care what we spent,
For the road downhill is an easy road and that was the way we went.

Then things got bad and a drought came on and it lasted over a year.
Our stock died off and our dams gave out and we knew that the end was near.
Our credit stopped and the bank foreclosed and our fathers place was sold,
For the road downhill is and easy road as the prodigal found of old.

Five years after the old man's death together we took the track.
I wandered into the nearest pub and I had a drink with Jack.
Then he shook my hand and he wished me luck and I knew he was close to tears,
And I've never set eyes on Jack since then or heard of him now for years.

Somewhere out to the west of Bourke he's humping his swag maybe,
Tramping along in the broiling sun and cursing himself and me.
I'd give two years of my worthless life, though it may not last that long,
For one more look at his honest face, one grip of his fingers strong

Well that's the tale of the Kerrigan boys and the moral is near the end.
You'll always have plenty of friend at hand as long as you've cash to spend.
We had our chance and we played the fool, it's too late now to repent,
For the road downhill is an easy road and that was the road we went.

Edward Harrington

The Swagless Swaggie

This happened many years ago
Before the bush was cleared,
When every man was six foot high
And wore a flowing beard.

One very hot and windy day,
Along the old coach road,
Towards Joe Murphy's halfway house
A bearded bushman strode.

He was a huge and heavy man,
Well over six foot high,
An old slouch hat was on his head,
And murder in his eye.

No billy can was in his hand,
No heavy swag he bore,
But deep and awful were the oaths
That swagless swaggie swore.

At last he reached the shanty door,
Into the bar he burst,
He dumped his hat upon the floor,
And cursed and cursed and cursed.

A neighboring shed had just cut out;
The bar was nearly full
Of shearers and of bullockies
Who'd come to cart the wool.

They were a rough and ready lot,
The bushmen gathered there,
But every man was stricken dumb,
To hear the stranger swear.

He cursed the bush, he cursed mankind,
The whole wide universe.
It froze their very blood to hear
That swagless swaggie curse.

Joe Murphy seized an empty pot
And filled it brimming full.
The stranger raised it to his lips
And took a mighty pull.

This seemed to cool him down a bit;
He finished off the ale,
And to the crowd around the bar
He told his awful tale.

"I met the Ben Hall gang," he said,
"The blankards stuck me up!
They pinched me billy, pinched me swag,
And pinched me flamin' pup!

They turned me pockets inside out,
And took me only quid!
I never thought they'd pinch me pipe,
But swelp me gawd they did!

I spoke to 'em as man to man,
I said I'd fight 'em all;
I would have broke O'Mealleys neck,
And tanned the hide of Hall.

They only laughed, and said good-bye,
And rode away to brag
Of how they stuck a swaggie up
And robbed him of his swag.

"I never done 'em any harm,
I thought 'em decent chaps.
But now I wouldn't raise a hand
To save 'em from the traps.

I'm finished with the bush for good,
I'm off to Wagga town
Where they won't stick a swaggie up
Or take a swaggie down.

The bushmen were a decent lot,

As bushmen mostly are.
They filled the stranger up with beer;
The hat went round the bar.

The shearers threw some blankets in
To make another swag,
The rousers gave a billy can
And brand new tucker bag.

Joe Murphy gave a meerschaum pipe
He hadn't smoked for years.
The stranger was too full of words,
His eyes were dim with tears.

The ringer shouted drinks all round
And then, to top it up,
The babbling brook, the shearers cook,
Gave him a kelpie pup.

Next day, an hour before the dawn,
The stranger took the track
Complete with pup and billy can,
His swag upon his back.

Along the most forsaken roads,
Intent on dodging graft,
He headed for the Great North West,
And laughed, and laughed and laughed.

Edward Harrington

There's Only The Two Of Us Here

I camped one night in an empty hut on the side of a lonely hill.
I didn't go much on empty huts, but the night was awful chill.
So I boiled me billy and had me tea and seen that the door was shut.
Then I went to bed in am empty bunk by the side of the old slab shed.

It must have been about twelve o'clock – I was feeling cosy and warm –
When at the foot of me bunk I sees a horrible ghostly form
It seemed in shape to be half an ape with a head like a chimpanzee
But wot the hell was it doin there, and wot did it want with me?

You may say if you please that I had DTs or call me a crimson liar,
But I wish you had seen it as plain as me, with it's eyes like coals of fire.
Then it gave a moan and a horrible groan that curdled me blood with fear,
And 'There's only the two of us here,' it ses. 'There's only the two of us here!'

I kept one eye on the old hut door and one on the awful brute;
I only wanted to dress meself and get to the door and scoot.
But I couldn't find where I'd left me boots so I hadn't a chance to clear
And, 'There's only the two of us here,' it moans. 'There's only the two of us here!'

I hadn't a thing to defend meself, not even a stick or stone,
And 'There's only the two of here!' It ses again with a horrible groan.
I thought I'd better make some reply, though I reckoned me end was near,
'By the Holy Smoke, when I find me boots, there'll be only one of us here.'

I get me hands on me number tens and out through the door I scoots,
And I lit the whole of the ridges up with the sparks from me blucher boots.
So I've never slept in a hut since then, and I tremble and shake with fear
When I think of the horrible form wot moaned, 'There's only the two of us here!'

Edward Harrington