# **Classic Poetry Series**

# **Alec Derwent Hope**

- poems -

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#### **Australia**

A Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey In the field uniform of modern wars, Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.

They call her a young country, but they lie: She is the last of lands, the emptiest, A woman beyond her change of life, a breast Still tender but within the womb is dry.

Without songs, architecture, history: The emotions and superstitions of younger lands, Her rivers of water drown among inland sands, The river of her immense stupidity

Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth. In them at last the ultimate men arrive Whose boast is not: "we live" but "we survive", A type who will inhabit the dying earth.

And her five cities, like five teeming sores, Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state Where second hand Europeans pullulate Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find The Arabian desert of the human mind, Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes Which is called civilization over there.

#### **Commination**

<i>He that is filthy let him be filthy still.</i> Rev. 22.11

Like John on Patmos, brooding on the Four Last Things, I meditate the ruin of friends Whose loss, Lord, brings this grand new curse to mind Now send me foes worth cursing, or send more - Since means should be proportionate to ends - For mine are few and of the piddling kind:

Drivellers, snivellers, writers of bad verse, Backbiting bitches, snipers from a pew, Small turds from the great arse of self-esteem; On such as these I would not waste my curse. God send me soon the enemy or two Fit for the wrath of God, of whom I dream:

Some Caliban of Culture, some absurd Messiah of the Paranoiac State, Some Educator wallowing in his slime, Some Prophet of the Uncreating Word Monsters a man might reasonably hate, Masters of Progress, Leaders of our Time;

But chiefly the Suborners: Common Tout And Punk, the Advertiser, him I mean And his smooth hatchet-man, the Technocrat. Them let my malediction single out, These modern Dives with their talking screen Who lick the sores of Lazarus and grow fat,

Licensed to pimp, solicit and procure Here in my house, to foul my feast, to bawl Their wares while I am talking with my friend, To pour into my ears a public sewer Of all the Strumpet Muses sell and all That prostituted science has to vend.

In this great Sodom of a world, which turns The treasure of the Intellect to dust And every gift to some perverted use, What wonder if the human spirit learns Recourses of despair or of disgust, Abortion, suicide and self-abuse.

But let me laugh, Lord; let me crack and strain The belly of this derision till it burst; For I have seen too much, have lived too long A citizen of Sodom to refrain, And in the stye of Science, from the first, Have watched the pearls of Circe drop on dung.

Let me not curse my children, nor in rage Mock at the just, the helpless and the poor, Foot-fast in Sodom's rat-trap; make me bold To turn on the Despoilers all their age Invents: damnations never felt before And hells more horrible than hot and cold.

And, since in Heaven creatures purified Rational, free, perfected in their kinds Contemplate God and see Him face to face In Hell, for sure, spirits transmogrified, Paralysed wills and parasitic minds Mirror their own corruption and disgrace.

Now let this curse fall on my enemies My enemies, Lord, but all mankind's as well Prophets and panders of their golden calf; Let Justice fit them all in their degrees; Let them, still living, know that state of hell, And let me see them perish, Lord, and laugh.

Let them be glued to television screens
Till their minds fester and the trash they see
Worm their dry hearts away to crackling shells;
Let ends be so revenged upon their means
That all that once was human grows to be
A flaccid mass of phototropic cells;

Let the dog love his vomit still, the swine Squelch in the slough; and let their only speech Be Babel; let the specious lies they bred Taste on their tongues like intellectual wine Let sung commercials surfeit them, till each Goggles with nausea in his nauseous bed.

And, lest with them I learn to gibber and gloat, Lead me, for Sodom is my city still, To seek those hills in which the heart finds ease; Give Lot his leave; let Noah build his boat, And me and mine, when each has laughed his fill, View thy damnation and depart in peace.

# Conquistador

I sing of the decline of Henry Clay Who loved a white girl of uncommon size. Although a small man in a little way, He had in him some seed of enterprise.

Each day he caught the seven-thirty train To work, watered his garden after tea, Took an umbrella if it looked like rain A nd was remarkably like you or me.

He had his hair cut once a fortnight, tried Not to forget the birthday of his wife, And might have lived unnoticed till he died Had not ambition entered Henry's life.

He met her in the lounge of an hotel -A most unusual place for him to go -But there he was and there she was as well Sitting alone. He ordered beers for two.

She was so large a girl that when they came He gave the waiter twice the usual tip. She smiled without surprise, told him her name, And as the name trembled on Henry's lip,

His parched soul, swelling like a desert root, Broke out its delicate dream upon the air; The mountains shook with earthquake under foot; An angel seized him suddenly by the hair;

The sky was shrill with peril as he passed; A hurricane crushed his senses with its din; The wildfire crackled up his reeling mast; The trumpet of a maelstrom sucked hirn in;

The desert shrivelled and burnt off his feet; His bones and buttons an enormous snake Vomited up; still in the shimmering heat The pygmies showed him their forbidden lake

And then transfixed him with their poison darts; He married six black virgins in a bunch, Who, when they had drawn out his manly parts, Stewed him and ate him lovingly for lunch.

Adventure opened wide its grisly jaws; Henry looked in and knew the Hero's doom. The huge white girl drank on without a pause And, just at closing time, she asked him home.

The tram they took was full of Roaring Boys Announcing the world's ruin and Judgment Day;

The sky blared with its grand orchestral voice The Gotterdammerung of Henry Clay.

But in her quiet room they were alone. There, towering over Henry by a head, She stood and took her clothes off one by one, And then she stretched herself upon the bed.

Her bulk of beauty, her stupendous grace Challenged the lion heart in his puny dust. Proudly his Moment looked him in the face: He rose to meet it as a hero must;

Climbed the white mountain of unravished snow, Planted his tiny flag upon the peak. The smooth drifts, scarcely breathing, lay below. She did not take the trouble to smile or speak.

And afterwards, it may have been in play, The enormous girl rolled over and squashed him flat; And, as she could not send him home that way, Used him thereafter as a bedside mat.

Speaking at large, I will say this of her: S he did not spare expense to make him nice. Tanned on both sides and neatly edged with fur, The job would have been cheap at any price.

And when, in winter, getting out of bed, Her large soft feet pressed warmly on the skin, The two glass eyes would sparkle in his head, The jaws extend their papier-mache grin.

Good people, for the soul of Henry Clay Offer your prayers, and view his destiny! He was the Hero of our Time. He may With any luck, one day, be you or me.

# **Crossing the Frontier**

Crossing the frontier they were stopped in time, Told, quite politely, they would have to wait: Passports in order, nothing to declare And surely holding hands was not a crime Until they saw how, ranged across the gate, All their most formidable friends were there.

Wearing his conscience like a crucifix, Her father, rampant, nursed the Family Shame; And, armed with their old-fashioned dinner-gong, His aunt, who even when they both were six, Had just to glance towards a childish game To make them feel that they were doing wrong.

And both their mothers, simply weeping floods, Her head-mistress, his boss, the parish priest, And the bank manager who cashed their cheques; The man who sold him his first rubber-goods; Dog Fido, from whose love-life, shameless beast, She first observed the basic facts of sex.

They looked as though they had stood there for hours; For years - perhaps for ever. In the trees Two furtive birds stopped courting and flew off; While in the grass beside the road the flowers Kept up their guilty traffic with the bees. Nobody stirred. Nobody risked a cough.

Nobody spoke. The minutes ticked away; The dog scratched idly. Then, as parson bent And whispered to a guard who hurried in, The customs-house loudspeakers with a bray Of raucous and triumphant argument Broke out the wedding march from Lohengrin.

He switched the engine off: "We must turn back." She heard his voice break, though he had to shout Against a din that made their senses reel, And felt his hand, so tense in hers, go slack. But suddenly she laughed and said: "Get out! Change seats! Be quick!" and slid behind the wheel.

And drove the car straight at them with a harsh, Dry crunch that showered both with scraps and chips, Drove through them; barriers rising let them pass Drove through and on and on, with Dad's moustache Beside her twitching still round waxen lips And Mother's tears still streaming down the glass.

#### **Death of the Bird**

For every bird there is this last migration; Once more the cooling year kindles her heart; With a warm passage to the summer station Love pricks the course in lights across the chart.

Year after year a speck on the map, divided By a whole hemisphere, summons her to come; Season after season, sure and safely guided, Going away she is also coming home.

And being home, memory becomes a passion With which she feeds her brood and straws her nest, Aware of ghosts that haunt the heart's possession And exiled love mourning within the breast.

The sands are green with a mirage of valleys; The palm tree casts a shadow not its own; Down the long architrave of temple or palace Blows a cool air from moorland scarps of stone.

And day by day the whisper of love grows stronger; That delicate voice, more urgent with despair, Custom and fear constraining her no longer, Drives her at last on the waste leagues of air.

A vanishing speck in those inane dominions, Single and frail, uncertain of her place, Alone in the bright host of her companions, Lost in the blue unfriendliness of space.

She feels it close now, the appointed season; The invisible thread is broken as she flies; Suddenly, without warning, without reason, The guiding spark of instinct winks and dies.

Try as she will, the trackless world delivers No way, the wilderness of light no sign; Immense, complex contours of hills and rivers Mock her small wisdom with their vast design.

The darkness rises from the eastern valleys, And the winds buffet her with their hungry breath, And the great earth, with neither grief nor malice, Receives the tiny burden of her death.

# **Easter Hymn**

Make no mistake; there will be no forgiveness; No voice can harm you and no hand will save; Fenced by the magic of deliberate darkness You walk on the sharp edges of the wave;

Trouble with soul again the putrefaction Where Lazarus three days rotten lies content. Your human tears will be the seed of faction Murder the sequel to your sacrament.

The City of God is built like other cities: Judas negotiates the loans you float; You will meet Caiaphas upon committees; You will be glad of Pilate's casting vote.

Your truest lovers still the foolish virgins, Your heart will sicken at the marriage feasts Knowing they watch you from the darkened gardens Being polite to your official guests.

#### **Meditation on a Bone**

A piece of bone, found at Trondhjem in 1901, with the following runic inscription (about A.D. 1050) cut on it: <i>I loved her as a maiden; I will not trouble Erlend's detestable wife; better she should be a widow. </i>

Words scored upon a bone, Scratched in despair or rage --Nine hundred years have gone; Now, in another age, They burn with passion on A scholar's tranquil page.

The scholar takes his pen And turns the bone about, And writes those words again. Once more they seethe and shout And through a human brain Undying hate rings out.

"I loved her when a maid; I loathe and love the wife That warms another's bed: Let him beware his life!" The scholar's hand is stayed; His pen becomes a knife

To grave in living bone
The fierce archaic cry.
He sits and reads his own
Dull sum of misery.
A thousand years have flown
Before that ink is dry.

And, in a foreign tongue, A man, who is not he, Reads and his heart is wrung This ancient grief to see, And thinks: When I am dung, What bone shall speak for me?

# **Morning Coffee**

Reading the menu at the morning service:
- Iced Venusberg perhaps, or buttered bum Orders the usual sex-ersatz, and, nervous,
Glances around - Will she or won't she come?

The congregation dissected into pews Gulping their strip teas in the luminous cavern Agape's sacamental berry stews; The nickel-plated light and clatter of heaven

Receive him, temporary Tantalus Into the Lookingglassland's firescape. Suckled on Jungfraumilch his eyes discuss, The werwolf twins, their mock Sabellian rape.

This is their time to reap the standing scorn, Blonde Rumina's crop. Beneath her leafless tree Ripe-rumped she lolls and clasps the plenteous horn. Cool customers who defy his Trinity

Feel none the less, and thrill, ur-vater Fear Caged in the son. For, though this ghost behave Experienced daughters recognize King Leer: Lot also had his daughters in a cave.

Full sail the proud three-decker sandwiches With the eye-fumbled priestesses repass; On their swan lake the enchanted icecreams freeze, The amorous fountain prickles in the glass

And at the introit of this mass emotion She comes, she comes, a balanced pillar of blood, Guides through the desert, divides the sterile ocean, Brings sceptic Didymus his berserk food,

Sits deftly, folding elegant thighs, and takes Her time. She skins her little leather hands, Conscious that wavering towards her like tame snakes The polyp eyes converge.... The prophet stands

Dreading the answer from her burning bush: This unconsuming flame, the outlaw's blow, Plague, exodus, Sinai, ruptured stones that gush, God's telegram: Dare Now! Let this people go!

#### **Observation Car**

To be put on the train and kissed and given my ticket, Then the station slid backward, the shops and the neon lighting, Reeling off in a drunken blur, with a whole pound note in my pocket And the holiday packed with Perhaps. It used to be very exciting.

The present and past were enough. I did not mind having my back To the engine. I sat like a spider and spun Time backward out of my guts - or rather my eyes - and the track Was a Now dwindling off to oblivion. I thought it was fun:

The telegraph poles slithered up in a sudden crescendo As we sliced the hill and scattered its grazing sheep; The days were a wheeling delirium that led without end to Nights when we plunged into roaring tunnels of sleep.

But now I am tired of the train. I have learned that one tree Is much like another, one hill the dead spit of the next I have seen tailing off behind all the various types of country Like a clock running down. I am bored and a little perplexed;

And weak with the effort of endless evacuation
Of the long monotonous Now, the repetitive, tidy
Officialdom of each siding, of each little station
Labelled Monday, Tuesday - and goodness! what happened to - Friday?

And the maddening way the other passengers alter: The schoolgirl who goes to the Ladies' comes back to her seat A lollipop blonde who leads you on to assault her, And you've just got her skirts round her waist and her pants round her feet

When you find yourself fumbling about the nightmare knees Of a pink hippopotamus with a permanent wave Who sends you for sandwiches and a couple of teas, But by then she has whiskers, no teeth and one foot in the grave.

I have lost my faith that the ticket tells where we are going. There are rumours the driver is mad - we are all being trucked To the abattoirs somewhere - the signals are jammed and unknowing We aim through the night full speed at a wrecked viaduct.

But I do not believe them. The future is rumour and drivel; Only the past is assured. From the observation car I stand looking back and watching the landscape shrivel, Wondering where we are going and just where the hell we are,

Remembering how I planned to break the journey, to drive My own car one day, to have choice in my hands and my foot upon power, To see through the trumpet throat of vertiginous perspective My urgent Now explode continually into flower,

To be the Eater of Time, a poet and not that sly Anus of mind the historian. It was so simple and plain To live by the sole, insatiable influx of the eye. But something went wrong with the plan: I am still on the train.

#### **Parabola**

Year after year the princess lies asleep Until the hundred years foretold are done, Easily drawing her enchanted breath. Caught on the monstrous thorns around the keep, Bones of the youths who sought her, one by one Rot loose and rattle to the ground beneath.

But when the Destined Lover at last shall come, For whom alone Fortune reserves the prize The thorns give way; he mounts the cobwebbed stair Unerring he finds the tower, the door, the room, The bed where, waking at his kiss she lies Smiling in the loose fragrance of her hair.

That night, embracing on the bed of state, He ravishes her century of sleep And she repays the debt of that long dream; Future and Past compose their vast debate; His seed now sown, her harvest ripe to reap Enact a variation on the theme.

For in her womb another princess waits, A sleeping cell, a globule of bright dew. Jostling their way up that mysterious stair, A horde of lovers bursts between the gates, All doomed but one, the destined suitor, who By luck first reaches her and takes her there.

A parable of all we are or do!
The life of Nature is a formal dance
In which each step is ruled by what has been
And yet the pattern emerges always new
The marriage of linked cause and random chance
Gives birth perpetually to the unforeseen.

One parable for the body and the mind: With science and heredity to thank
The heart is quite predictable as a pump,
But, let love change its beat, the choice is blind.
'Now' is a cross-roads where all maps prove blank,
And no one knows which way the cat will jump.

So here stand I, by birth a cross between Determined pattern and incredible chance, Each with an equal share in what I am. Though I should read the code stored in the gene, Yet the blind lottery of circumstance Mocks all solutions to its cryptogram.

As in my flesh, so in my spirit stand I When does this hundred years draw to its close? The hedge of thorns before me gives no clue.

My predecessor's carcass, shrunk and dry, Stares at me through the spikes. Oh well, here goes! I have this thing, and only this, to do.

#### **Phallus**

This was the gods' god, The leashed divinity, Divine divining rod And Me within the me.

By mindlight tower and tree Its shadow on the ground Throw, and in darkness she Whose weapon is her wound

Fends off the knife, the sword, The Tiger and the Snake; It stalks the virgin's bed And bites her wide awake.

Her Bab-el-Mandeb waits Her Red Sea gate of tears: The blood-sponge god dilates, His rigid pomp appears;

Sets in the toothless mouth A tongue of prophecy. It speaks in naked Truth Indifference for me

Love, a romantic slime That lubricates his way Against the stream of Time. And though I win the day

His garrisons deep down Ignore my victory, Abandon this doomed town, Crawl through a sewer and flee.

A certain triumph, of course, Bribes me with brief joy: Stiffly my Wooden Horse Receive into your Troy.

#### **Standardization**

When, darkly brooding on this Modern Age, The journalist with his marketable woes Fills up once more the inevitable page Of fatuous, flatulent, Sunday-paper prose;

Whenever the green aesthete starts to whoop With horror at the house not made with hands And when from vacuum cleaners and tinned soup Another pure theosophist demands

Rebirth in other, less industrial stars Where huge towns thrust up in synthetic stone And films and sleek miraculous motor cars And celluloid and rubber are unknown;

When from his vegetable Sunday School Emerges with the neatly maudlin phrase Still one more Nature poet, to rant or drool About the "Standardization of the Race";

I see, stooping among her orchard trees, The old, sound Earth, gathering her windfalls in, Broad in the hams and stiffening at the knees, Pause and I see her grave malicious grin.

For there is no manufacturer competes With her in the mass production of shapes and things. Over and over she gathers and repeats The cast of a face, a million butterfly wings.

She does not tire of the pattern of a rose. Her oldest tricks still catch us with surprise. She cannot recall how long ago she chose The streamlined hulls of fish, the snail's long eyes,

Love, which still pours into its ancient mould The lashing seed that grows to a man again, From whom by the same processes unfold Unending generations of living men.

She has standardized his ultimate needs and pains. Lost tribes in a lost language mutter in His dreams: his science is tethered to their brains, His guilt merely repeats Original Sin.

And beauty standing motionless before Her mirror sees behind her, mile on mile, A long queue in an unknown corridor, Anonymous faces plastered with her smile.

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# The Gateway

Now the heart sings with all its thousand voices To hear this city of cells, my body, sing. The tree through the stiff clay at long last forces Its thin strong roots and taps the secret spring.

And the sweet waters without intermission Climb to the tips of its green tenement; The breasts have borne the grace of their possession, The lips have felt the pressure of content.

Here I come home: in this expected country They know my name and speak it with delight. I am the dream and you my gates of entry, The means by which I waken into light.

#### The Pleasure of Princes

What pleasures have great princes? These: to know Themselves reputed mad with pride or power; To speak few words -- few words and short bring low This ancient house, that city with flame devour;

To make old men, their father's enemies, Drunk on the vintage of the former age; To have great painters show their mistresses Naked to the succeeding time; engage

The cunning of able, treacherous ministers
To serve, despite themselves, the cause they hate,
And leave a prosperous kingdom to their heirs
Nursed by the caterpillars of the state;

To keep their spies in good men's hearts; to read The malice of the wise, and act betimes; To hear the Grand Remonstrances of greed Led by the pure; cheat justice of her crimes;

To beget worthless sons and, being old, By starlight climb the battlements, and while The pacing sentry hugs himself for cold, Keep vigil like a lover, muse and smile,

And think, to see from the grim castle steep The midnight city below rejoice and shine: "There my great demon grumbles in his sleep And dreams of his destruction, and of mine."

# The Return of Persephone

Gliding through the still air, he made no sound; Wing-shod and deft, dropped almost at her feet, And searched the ghostly regiments and found The living eyes, the tremor of breath, the beat Of blood in all that bodiless underground.

She left her majesty; she loosed the zone Of darkness and put by the rod of dread. Standing, she turned her back upon the throne Where, well she knew, the Ruler of the Dead, Lord of her body and being, sat like stone;

Stared with his ravenous eyes to see her shake The midnight drifting from her loosened hair, The girl once more in all her actions wake, The blush of colour in her cheeks appear Lost with her flowers that day beside the lake.

The summer flowers scattering, the shout,
The black manes plunging down to the black pit -Memory or dream? She stood awhile in doubt,
Then touched the Traveller God's brown arm and met
His cool, bright glance and heard his words ring out:

"Queen of the Dead and Mistress of the Year!"
-- His voice was the ripe ripple of the corn;
The touch of dew, the rush of morning air -"Remember now the world where you were born;
The month of your return at last is here."

And still she did not speak, but turned again Looking for answer, for anger, for command: The eyes of Dis were shut upon their pain; Calm as his marble brow, the marble hand Slept on his knee. Insuperable disdain

Foreknowing all bounds of passion, of power, of art, Mastered but could not mask his deep despair. Even as she turned with Hermes to depart, Looking her last on her grim ravisher For the first time she loved him from her heart.

# The School of Night

What did I study in your School of Night?
When your mouth's first unfathomable yes
Opened your body to be my book, I read
My answers there and learned the spell aright,
Yet, though I searched and searched, could never guess
What spirits it raised nor where their questions led.

Those others, familiar tenants of your sleep,
The whisperers, the grave somnambulists
Whose eyes turn in to scrutinize their woe,
The giant who broods above the nightmare steep,
That sleeping girl, shuddering, with clenched fists,
A vampire baby suckling at her toe,

They taught me most. The scholar held his pen And watched his blood drip thickly on the page To form a text in unknown characters Which, as I scanned them, changed and changed again: The lines grew bars, the bars a Delphic cage And I the captive of his magic verse.

# **Tiger**

<i>At noon thepaper tigers roar </i>
-- Miroslav Holub

The paper tigers roar at noon; The sun is hot, the sun is high. They roar in chorus, not in tune, Their plaintive, savage hunting cry.

O, when you hear them, stop your ears And clench your lids and bite your tongue. The harmless paper tiger bears Strong fascination for the young.

His forest is the busy street; His dens the forum and the mart; He drinks no blood, he tastes no meat: He riddles and corrupts the heart.

But when the dusk begins to creep From tree to tree, from door to door, The jungle tiger wakes from sleep And utters his authentic roar.

It bursts the night and shakes the stars Till one breaks blazing from the sky; Then listen! If to meet it soars Your heart's reverberating cry,

My child, then put aside your fear: Unbar the door and walk outside! The real tiger waits you there; His golden eyes shall be your guide.

And, should he spare you in his wrath, The world and all the worlds are yours; And should he leap thejungle path And clasp you with his bloody jaws,

Then say, as his divine embrace Destroys the mortal parts of you: I too am of that royal race Who do what we are born to do.