

Classic Poetry Series

Bernard O'Dowd

- poems -

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Australia

LAST sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,
Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West
In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?
Are you for Light, and trimmed, with oil in place,
Or but a Will o' Wisp on marshy quest?
A new demesne for Mammon to infest?
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face?

The cenotaphs of species dead elsewhere
That in your limits leap and swim and fly,
Or trail uncanny harp-strings from your trees,
Mix omens with the auguries that dare
To plant the Cross upon your forehead sky,
A virgin helpmate Ocean at your knees.

Bernard O'Dowd

Envy

Black drips the ooze that you secrete on all
That Honour's burin graves or Love holds dear:
At sacrifice you laugh, at virtue sneer,
And sour rebellion's must, the waking thrall
Would ripen into Freedom, with the gall
Of green suspicion. God of drones, you hear
Mutter of plots in all Success: on seer
And saint behold your own foul motives crawl.
O Gluttony that would but dare not gorge!
Theft of the heart that dreads the handcuff! Hate,
Too cowardly to hurl the bolts you forge!
And Lust that fears to pluck the flowers you smell!
Too low your lintel to seduce the great!
The meanest of the Seven doors of Hell!

Bernard O'Dowd

Last Stanzas of the Bush

WHERE is Australia, singer, do you know?
These sordid farms and joyless factories,
Mephitic mines and lanes of pallid woe?
Those ugly towns and cities such as these
With incense sick to all unworthy power,
And all old sin in full malignant flower?
No! to her bourn her children still are faring:
She is a temple that we are to build:
For her the ages have been long preparing:
She is a prophecy to be fulfilled!

All that we love in olden lands and lore
Was signal of her coming long ago!
Bacon foresaw her, Campanella, More,
And Plato's eyes were with her star aglow!
Who toiled for Truth, whate'er their countries were,
Who fought for Liberty, they yearned for her!
No corsair's gathering ground, nor tryst for schemers,
No chapman Carthage to a huckster Tyre,
She is the Eldorado of old dreamers,
The Sleeping Beauty of the world's desire.

She is the scroll on which we are to write
Mythologies our own and epics new:
She is the port of our propitious flight
From Ur idolatrous and Pharaoh's crew.
She is our own, unstained, if worthy we,
By dream, or god, or star we would not see:
Her crystal beams all but the eagle dazzle.
Her wind-wide ways none but the strong-winged sail:
She is Eutopia, she is Hy-Brasil,
The watchers on the tower of morning hail!

Yet she shall be as we, the Potter, mould:
Altar or tomb, as we aspire, despair:
What wine we bring shall she, the chalice, hold:
What word we write shall she, the script, declare:
Bandage our eyes, she shall be Memphis, Spain:
Barter our souls, she shall be Tyre again:
And if we pour on her the red oblation,
All o'er the world shall Asshur's buzzards throng:
Love-lit, her Chaos shall become Creation:
And dewed with dream, her silence flower in song.

Bernard O'Dowd

Love and Sacrifice

CAN we not consecrate
To man and God above
This volume of our great
Supernal tide of love?

'Twere wrong its wealth to waste
On merely me and you,
In selfish touch and taste,
As other lovers do.

This love is not as theirs:
It came from the Divine,
Whose glory still it wears,
And print of Whose design.

The world is full of woe,
The time is blurred with dust,
Illusions breed and grow,
And eyes' and flesh's lust.

The mighty league with Wrong
And stint the weakling's bread;
The very lords of song
With Luxury have wed.

Fair Art deserts the mass,
And loiters with the gay;
And only gods of brass
Are popular to-day.

Two souls with love inspired,
Such lightning love as ours,
Could spread, if we desired,
Dismay among such powers:

Could social stables purge
Of filth where festers strife:
Through modern baseness surge
A holier tide of life.

Yea, two so steeped in love
From such a source, could draw
The angels from above
To lead all to their Law.

We have no right to seek
Repose in rosy bower,
When Hunger thins the cheek
Of childhood every hour:

Nor while the tiger, Sin,
'Mid youths and maidens roams,

Should Duty skulk within
These selfish cosy homes.

Our place is in the van
With those crusaders, who
Maintain the rights of man
'Gainst despot and his crew.

If sacrifice may move
Their load of pain from men,
The greatest right of Love
Is to renounce It then.

Ah, Love, the earth is woe's
And sadly helps needs:
And, till its burden goes,
Our work is—where it bleeds.

Bernard O'Dowd

Love's Substitute

This love, that dares not warm before its flame
Our yearning hands, or from its tempting tree
Yield fruit we may consume, or let us claim
In Hymen's scroll of happy heraldry
The twining glyphs of perfect you and me --
May kindle social fires whence curls no blame,
Find gardens where no fruits forbidden be,
And mottoes weave, unsullied by a shame.

For, love, unmothered Childhood wanly waits
For such as you to cherish it to Youth:
Raw social soils untilled need Love's own verve
That Peace a-flower may oust their weedy hates:
And where Distress would faint from wolfish sleuth
The perfect lovers' symbol is "We serve!"

Bernard O'Dowd

May Day

Come Jack, our place is with the ruck
On the open road today,
Not with the tepid "footpath sneak"
Or with the wise who stop away.

A straggling, tame procession, perhaps,
A butt for burgess scorn;
Its flags are ragged sentiments,
And its music's still unborn.

Though none respectable are here,
And trim officials ban,
Our duty, Jack, is not with them,
But here with Hope and Man.

Nor have we cause for shame, who see,
In the glory-lighted street,
The Old Brigade of Liberty
The partial ranks complete.

There's Shelley, Byron, arm in arm,
With Schiller, Uhland, near:
While cheek by jowl with anarch "crank"
See young Camille appear.

Marat keeps line with Spartacus,
Lone Dantes grimly stalk;
The meagre Knights of Labour "push"
With the Twelve Apostles walk.

Bakunin, Marx, Lassalle are there,
Grey Whitman's with the Greeks,
Dutch "Beggars" chums with Ironside,
Or to Bastille hero speaks.

Valliant and Brutus, Vane, Kossuth,
Find here a fitting tryst;
That Yarra-banker far ahead
Is keeping step with Christ.

Before, behind, around, surge on
Those unknown Great, whose yeast,
Impermeant, ensures result,
Tho' Hope's own song had ceased.

With flowers today the sky's festooned;
To yearning hosts a-sigh
On winds perfumed with memories
May's fair-winged forecasts fly.

No longer prostitute to Wealth,
among the aery show

The Lyric Muse accompanies
The Marseillaise below.

And how the gales of Freedom move,
Like wildfire's leap and fall,
Or north wind's through autumnal grass,
The red flags over all.

Yes! Ther's our place, whatever flames
Those nearing clouds display,
Tho' much they mean to footpath sneaks
And the wise who stop away.

Bernard O'Dowd

Our Duty

Yet what were Love if man remains unfree,
And woman's sunshine sordid merchandise:
If children's Hope is blasted ere they see
Its shoots of youth from out the branchlets rise:
If thought is chained, and gagged is Speech, and Lies
Enthroned as Law befoul posterity,
And haggard Sin's ubiquitous disguise
Insults the face of God where'er men be?

Ay, what were Love, my love, did we not love
Our stricken brothers so, as to resign
For Its own sake, the foison of Its dower:
That, so, we two may help them mount above
These layers of charnel air in which they pine,
To seek with us the Presence and the Power?

Bernard O'Dowd

Proletaria

THE SUNNY rounds of Earth contain
An obverse to its Day,
Our fertile Vagrancy's domain,
Wan Proletaria.

From pole to pole of Poverty
We stumble through the years,
With hazy-lanterned Memory
And Hope that never nears.

Wherever Plenty's crop invites
Our pitiful brigades,
Lurk cannoneers of Vested Rights,
Juristic ambuscades;

And here hangs Rent, that squalid cage
Within which Mammon thrusts,
Bound with the fetter of a wage,
The helots of his lusts.

With palsied Doubt as guide, we wind
Among the lanes of Need,
Where meagre Hungers scouting find
But slavered baits of Greed.

The wet-lipped Lamias of Caste,
Awaiting our advance,
Our choicest squadrons' fealty blast
With magic smile and glance:

Delilah-limbed temptations flit
Among our drowsy rows,
And on our willing captains fit
The badges of our foes.

What wonder sometimes if in stealth
Our starker outposts wait,
And, in the prowling eyes of Wealth,
Dash vitriol of Hate;

Or if our Samsons, ere too late,
Their treasons should make good
By whelming in the temple's fate
Their viper owners' brood!

Our polyandrous dam has borne
To Satan and to God
The hordes of Night, the clans of Morn,
That through our valleys plod.

Ah, motherhood of misery
For Christ-child as for pest!

The greater her fertility
The drier grows her breast!

Too many linger on the track;
A few outstrip the time:
Some, God has tattooed yellow, black,
And some disguised with crime.

Art's living archives here abound,
Carraras of Despair,
And those weird masks of Sight and Sound
The Tragic Muses wear.

Tho' blind and dull, 'tis we supply
The Painter's dazzling dreams;
The rolling flood of Poetry
From our dumb chaos streams.

Nay, when your world is over-tired,
And Genius comatose,
Our race, by Nemesis inspired,
Old Order overthrows:

With earthquake-life we thrill your land,
Refill the cruse of Art,
Revitalize spent Wisdom, and—
Resume our weary part.

The palace of successful Guilt
Is mortared with our shame;
On hecatombs of Us are built
The soaring towers of Fame.

We are the gnomes of Titan works
Whose throbbings never cease;
Our unregarded signet lurks
On every masterpiece.

The floating isles, that shuttling tie
All peoples into one
By adept steermen's sorcery
Of magnet, steam, and sun;

Religion's dolmens, Sphinxes, spires,
Her Biblic armouries;
The helot lightning of the wires
That mesh your lands and seas;

The viaducts 'tween Near and Far,
Whereon, o'er range and mead,
Bacchantic Trade's triumphant car
And iron tigers speed;

The modern steely crops that rise
Where technic Jasons sow:
—All these but feebly symbolize
The largesse we bestow.

And our reward? In this wan land,
In clientage of Greed,
Despised, polluted, maimed and banned,
To wander and—to breed

Bernard O'Dowd

Sloth (I) & (II)

Sloth (I)

Too many a Samsan lip your teeth indent:
Too many a Sybil girl you lure to make
The Great Refusal for a fireside sake:
And glamoured poet many a look has sent
Into those eyeballs bear-brown, somnolent,
Nor dreamed that devils in each muddy lake
Were sucking his devotion in to slake
The furrowed belly of your fanged content!
Religion's bane and Freedom's subtlest foe!
Behold the popped freight your barges bring
The dim-lit souls that crave the prophet's gleam,
Or fettered people's writhing 'neath their woe--
Gossamer clips and thriftless harvesting
Of phantom flocks and shadowy tilth of dream!

Sloth (II)

My dreams dissolve the day's illusive net:
While crested Action's billows blinding beat,
Omniscient Eyes in troughs of Faith I meet:
I wait with ancient stars until they set
Lest forward progress should their runes forget:
I am the rest that makes the bar complete:
And, in the shackled body of Defeat,
The womb of Baby Triumph living yet!
I am the blende of sleeping radiance:
The Siding where belated Industry
Draws from a Silent Tank tomorrow's zest:
Prophetic Art's preparatory Trance:
Dilating Force's Sabbath systole:
The Night of Brahm when worn Creators rest!

Bernard O'Dowd

The Cow

THIS is a rune I ravelled in the still,
Arrogant stare of an Australian cow—
'These pranked intruders of the hornless brow,
Puffed up with strange illusions of their skill
To fence, to milk, to fatten and to kill,
Once worshipped me with temple, rite and vow,
Crowned me with stars, and bade rapt millions bow
Before what abject guess they called my will!

'To-day, this flunkey of my midden, Man,
Throws child-oblations in my milking byre,
Stifles in slums to spare me lordly fields,
Flatters with spotless consorts my desire,
And for a pail of cream his birth-right yields,
As once in Egypt, Hellas, Ind, Iran!'

Bernard O'Dowd

The Poet

THEY tell you the poet is useless and empty the sound of his lyre,
That science has made him a phantom, and thinned to a shadow his fire:
Yet reformer has never demolished a dungeon or den of the foe
But the flame of the soul of a poet pulsed in every blow.

They tell you he hinders with tinklings, with gags from an obsolete stage,
The dramas of deed and the worship of Laws in a practical age:
But the deeds of to-day are the children of magical dreams he has sung,
And the Laws are ineffable Fires that from niggardly heaven he wrung!

The bosoms of women he sang of are heaving to-day in our maids:
The God that he drew from the Silence our woes or our weariness aids:
Not a maxim has needled through Time, but a poet had feathered its shaft,
Not a law is a boon to the people but he has dictated its draft.

And why do we fight for our fellows? For Liberty why do we long?
Because with the core of our nerve-cells are woven the lightnings of song!
For the poet for ages illumined the animal dreams of our sires,
And his Thought-Become-Flesh is the matrix of all our unselfish desires!

Yea, why are we fain for the Beautiful? Why should we die for the Right?
Because through the forested æons, in spite of the priests of the Night,
Undeterred by the faggot or cross, uncorrupted by glory or gold,
To our mothers the poet his Vision of Goodness and Beauty has told.

When, comrades, we thrill to the message of speaker in highway or hall,
The voice of the poet is reaching the silenter poet in all:
And again, as of old, when the flames are to leap up the turrets of Wrong,
Shall the torch of the New Revolution be lit from the words of a Song

Bernard O'Dowd

True America's Message

OUR manlier spirits hear and will obey
The Word YOU waft Australia o'er the sea—
'Be true, be brave, be merciful, be free!'
Not you, who, braggart, sent this wan array
Of hell-ships vomiting their Will-to-Slay, 5
These armoured Hates and pallid Envies we,
'Mid rattled mobs and flags hysteric, see
Tarnish the chaste horizon of our Bay:

But YOU we hear, our Comrades of the Cause,
Who face hyæna Mammon in his den: 10
And YOU, who dared your seas of blood to spill
To drag the swooning slave from vampire jaws:
Yea, YOU who freed unborn Australia, when
You singed King George's beard at Bunker's Hill.

Bernard O'Dowd

Young Democracy

HARK! Young Democracy from sleep
Our careless sentries raps:
A backwash from the Future's deep
Our Evil's foreland laps.

Unknown, these Titans of our Night
Their New Creation make:
Unseen, they toil and love and fight
That glamoured Man may wake.

Knights-errant of the human race,
The Quixotes of to-day,
For man as man they claim a place,
Prepare the tedious way.

They seek no dim-eyed mob's applause,
Deem base the titled name,
And spurn, for glory of their Cause,
The tawdry nymphs of Fame.

No masks of ignorance or sin
Hide from them you or me:
We're Man—no colour shames our skin,
No race or caste have we.

The prognathous Neanderthal,
To them, conceals the Bruce;
They see Dan Aesop in the thrall;
From swagmen Christ deduce.

Tho' butt for lecher's ribaldry
And scarred by woman's scorn,
In baby-burdened girl they see
God-motherhood forlorn.

With them, to racial siredom glides
The savage we deprave;
That eunuch brilliant Narses hides:
A Spartacus, that slave.

They Jesus find in manger waif;
In horse-boys Shakespearehood:
And earthquake-Luthers nestling safe
In German miner's brood.

The God that pulses everywhere
They know fills Satan's veins;
No felon but they see Him there
Behind His mirror's stains.

'Tis theirs Earth's charnel rooms to clear,
And ruthless sweep away

The Lares and Penates dear
To man in his decay.

Their restless energy supplies
Munitions that will wreck
The keeps whence feudal enemies
Our free banditti check.

Their unrelenting wars they wage,
These Furies of the Right,
Where myriad Falsehood's legions rage,
Artilleried by Might;

Where Fashion's stupid iron clamps
Young Innovation's head,
And Law the stalwart Present cramps
In Past's Procrustes-bed;

Where Pride of learning, substance, blood,
Or prowess in the strife,
Exacts from teeming lowlihood
The lion's share of life;

Where Gluttony would to the brutes
Degrade his loose-lipped gangs;
Where Tyranny his venom shoots
From one or million fangs;

Where Cruelty, in Wisdom's mask,
Piths fame from writhing beasts;
Where blest is racial Murder's task
By Christ's apostate priests.

In Punic or in Persian fray
With Love's and Conscience' foes,
Unadvertising Romans they,
And Spartans free from pose.

Abused as mad or traitors by
The trolls they would eject;
Cold-shouldered by wan Apathy;
Of motives mean suspect;

Outcast from social gaities;
Denied life's liliated grace;
They mount their hidden Calvaries
To save the human race.

The bowers of Art a few may know;
A few wait highly placed:
Most bear the hods of common woe,
And some you call disgraced.

But whether in the mob or school,
In church or poverty,
They teach and live the Golden Rule
Of Young Democracy:—

`That culture, joy and goodliness
Be th' equal right of all:
That Greed no more shall those oppress
Who by the wayside fall:

`That each shall share what all men sow:
That colour, caste's a lie:
That man is God, however low—
Is man, however high.'

Bernard O'Dowd