

Classic Poetry Series

Dame Mary Gilmore

- poems -

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Dame Mary Gilmore (16 August 1865 – 3 December 1962)

Mary Jean Cameron was born on 16 August 1865 at Cotta Walla near Goulburn, New South Wales. When Mary was one year old her parents, Donald and Mary Ann, decided to move to Wagga Wagga to join her maternal grandparents, the Beatties, who had moved there from Penrith, New South Wales in 1866.

Early Life

Gilmore's father obtained a job as a station manager at a property, Cowabbie some 100 km north of Wagga. A year later, he left that job to become a carpenter, building homesteads on properties in Wagga Wagga, Coolamon, Junee, Temora and West Wyalong for the next 10 years. This itinerant existence allowed Mary only a spasmodic formal education; however she did receive some on their frequent returns to Wagga Wagga, either staying with the Beatties or in rented houses.

Eventually, Gilmore's father purchased land and built his own house at Brucedale on the Junee Road, where they had a permanent home. She was then to attend, albeit briefly, Colin Pentland's private Academy at North Wagga and, when the school closed, transferred to Wagga Wagga Public School for two and a half years. At 14, in preparation to become a teacher, Gilmore worked as an assistant at her Uncle's school at Yerong Creek.

After completing her teaching exams in 1882, Gilmore accepted a position as a teacher at Wagga Wagga Public School where she worked until December 1885. After a short teaching spell at Illabo she took up a teaching position at Silverton near the mining town of Broken Hill. There Gilmore developed her socialist views and began writing poetry.

Literary Career

By 1931 Gilmore's views had become too radical for the AWU, but she soon found other outlets for her writing. She later wrote a regular column for the Communist Party's newspaper Tribune, although she was never a party member herself. In spite of her somewhat controversial politics, Gilmore accepted appointment as a Dame of the Order of the British Empire in 1937, becoming Dame Mary Gilmore DBE. During World War II she wrote stirring patriotic verse such as No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest.

In her later years, Gilmore, separated from her husband, moved to Sydney, and enjoyed her growing status as a national literary icon. Before 1940 she

published six volumes of verse and three editions of prose. After the war Gilmore published volumes of memoirs and reminiscences of colonial Australia and the literary giants of 1890s Sydney, thus contributing much material to the mythologising of that period. Gilmore died aged 97 and was accorded a state funeral.

Legacy

Gilmore's image appears on the Australian \$10 note, along with an illustration inspired by *No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest* and, as part of the copy-protection microprint, the text of the poem itself. The background of the illustration features a portrait of Gilmore by the well known Australian artist Sir William Dobell.

Eve- Song

I span and Eve span
A thread to bind the heart of man;
But the heart of man was a wandering thing
That came and went with little to bring:
Nothing he minded what we made,
As here he loitered, and there he stayed.
I span and Eve span
A thread to bind the heart of man;
But the more we span the more we found
It wasn't his heart but ours we bound.
For children gathered about our knees:
The thread was a chain that stole our ease.
And one of us learned in our children's eyes
That more than man was love and prize.
But deep in the heart of one of us lay
A root of loss and hidden dismay.

He said he was strong. He had no strength
But that which comes of breadth and length.
He said he was fond. But his fondness proved
The flame of an hour when he was moved.
He said he was true. His truth was but
A door that winds could open and shut.

And yet, and yet, as he came back,
Wandering in from the outward track,
We held our arms, and gave him our breast,
As a pillowing place for his head to rest.
I span and Eve span,
A thread to bind the heart of man!

Dame Mary Gilmore

Marri'd

IT'S singin' in an' out,
An' feelin' full of grace;
Here 'n' there, up an' down,
An' round about th' place.

It's rollin' up your sleeves,
An' whit'nin' up the hearth,
An' scrubbin' out th' floors,
An' sweepin' down th' path;

It's bakin' tarts an' pies,
An' shinin' up th' knives;
An' feelin' 's if some days
Was worth a thousand lives.

It's watchin' out th' door,
An' watchin' by th' gate;
An' watchin' down th' road,
An' wonderin' why he's late;

An' feelin' anxious-like,
For fear there's something wrong;
An' wonderin' why he's kep',
An' why he takes so long.

It's comin' back inside
An' sittin' down a spell,
To sort of make believe
You're thinkin' things is well.

It's gettin' up again
An' wand'rin' in an' out;
An' feelin' wistful-like,
Not knowin' what about;

An' flushin' all at once,
An' smilin' just so sweet,
An' feelin' real proud
The place is fresh an' neat.

An' feelin' awful glad
Like them that watch'd Silo'm;
An' everything because
A man is comin' Home!

Dame Mary Gilmore

Nationality

I have grown past hate and bitterness,
I see the world as one;
But though I can no longer hate,
My son is still my son.

All men at God's round table sit,
and all men must be fed;
But this loaf in my hand,
This loaf is my son's bread.

Dame Mary Gilmore

No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest

Sons of the mountains of Scotland,
Welshmen of coomb and defile,
Breed of the moors of England,
Children of Erin's green isle,
We stand four square to the tempest,
Whatever the battering hail-
No foe shall gather our harvest,
Or sit on our stockyard rail.

Our women shall walk in honour,
Our children shall know no chain,
This land, that is ours forever,
The invader shall strike at in vain.
Anzac!...Tobruk!...and Kokoda!...
Could ever the old blood fail?
No foe shall gather our harvest,
Or sit on our stockyard rail.

So hail-fellow-met we muster,
And hail-fellow-met fall in,
Wherever the guns may thunder,
Or the rocketing air-mail spin!
Born of the soil and the whirlwind,
Though death itself be the gale-
No foe shall gather our harvest
Or sit on our stockyard rail.

We are the sons of Australia,
of the men who fashioned the land;
We are the sons of the women
Who walked with them hand in hand;
And we swear by the dead who bore us,
By the heroes who blazed the trail,
No foe shall gather our harvest,
Or sit on our stockyard rail.

Dame Mary Gilmore

O Singer in Brown

O, singer in brown!
O, bird o' th' morn!
O, heart of delight
In th' deep o' th' thorn!

Glad is thy song
Thou joy o' th' morn,
Thou palpitant throat
In the heart o' th' thorn!

Thy song of the nest,
O, sweet o' th' morn!
A nest and an egg
In the thick o' th' thorn.

Dame Mary Gilmore

Old Botany Bay

"I'm old
Botany Bay;
stiff in the joints,
little to say.

I am he
who paved the way,
that you might walk
at your ease to-day;

I was the conscript
sent to hell
to make in the desert
the living well;

I bore the heat,
I blazed the track-
furrowed and bloody
upon my back.

I split the rock;
I felled the tree:
The nation was-
Because of me!

Old Botany Bay
Taking the sun
from day to day...
shame on the mouth
that would deny
the knotted hands
that set us high!

Dame Mary Gilmore

Pejar Creek

Deep in the meadow grass
Easy stand the cattle,
Lightly lock the young bulls
In a mimic battle,
Pride gathers with each shock,
Every break and rally -
That's where the Pejar runs,

Runs like a slip of silver through the valley.
Softly as a thrush sings
In the morning hushes,
Softly sing the waters
Round the reedy rushes,
Softly at the sand-bar,
Softly at the sally -
That's where the Pejar runs,
Runs like a slip of silver through the valley.

Where awakes the morning
To dapple all the hills,
Where dewdrop, shaken,
Pendant slides and spills,
Where the golden bugles
Sunset calls reveille -
That's where the Pejar runs,
Runs like a slip of silver through the valley.

Where the springtime blossoms
Like a mellow laughter,
Over all the grasses,
Over ridge and rafter,
Over all the tree-tops,
Down each ferny valley -
That's where the Pejar runs,

Runs like a slip of silver through the valley.
Where the Pejar rises
Springs the Wollondilly,
Twinned upon the mountains
Babbling brook and ghyllie;

Where the bridge-heads rumble
Side by side they dally -
Out where the Pejar runs,
Runs like a slip of silver through the valley.

Dame Mary Gilmore

Singapore

They grouped together about the chief
And each one looked at his mate,
Ashamed to think that Australian men
Should meet such bitter fate!
And black was the wrath in each hot heart
And savage oaths they swore
As they thought of how they had all been ditched
By "Impregnable" Singapore.

In her vaunted place she squatted the sea
On a base that was Maginot bred
Her startled face looked up at the skies
To the enemy planes o'erhead.
Enemy planes; while ours were - where?
That cry we had heard before
Our hearts were wrung as it rose this time
From beleaguered Singapore.

She brought forth death as her eldest child
With defeat as her second son.
Then she hung a white flag out on a staff
To show that her task was done.
And sick with rage the Australians stood,
And God! how those Anzacs swore -
Bennett and all his men alike -
At the fall of Singapore.

Whose was the fault she betrayed our troops?
Whose was the fault she failed!?
Ask it of those who lowered the flag
At once to the mast was nailed,
Tell them we'll raise it on Anzac soil
With hearts that are steeled to the core
We swear by our dead and captive sons
REVENGE FOR SINGAPORE!

Dame Mary Gilmore

Sweethearts

IT'S gettin' bits o' posies,
'N' feelin' mighty good;
A-thrillin' 'cause she loves you,
An' wond'rin' why she should;

An' stoppin' sort o' sudden,
Because you're full o' thought;
An' quick with res'less feelin's
That make life seem too short!

It's feelin' 's if she'd loved you
Before the world was made;
As if she still would love you,
When all our debts are paid;

As if there's nothin' mattered,
As if the world was good,
As if the Lord was lookin',
An' sort o' understood.

It's feelin' kind an' gentle
To everything that's weak,
And doin' jus' sich actions
As nearly seem to speak;

Sich actions women reckon
Are certain to occur
When he's in love with some one,
And that some one is—her.

Dame Mary Gilmore

The First Thrush

Though leaves have fallen long since,
The wagtails flirt and flit,
Glad in the morning sun;
While, on the knotted quince,
The dewdrops, pearled on it,
Bead to a little run. . . .

Soft as a breathing air
There came a lovely sound
Out of the branches bare;
So rich it was, and round,
Sense stood, in listening bound,
Stilled to its sweetness there!
It was the thrush's note,

That seemed as though his heart
On some loved thing did dote;
As though he yearned apart,
Knowing some hidden smart,
Pain in the long sweet rote.

There, as the spider hung
Grey-breasted 'gainst the brown
Skin of the quince, he sung
A song that o'er the town,
Rose up as though to crown
The tree-tops whence it sprung.

And now, it seems to me,
That long full breath he drew,
Like perfume shed on air,
Still dwells within the tree,
Though long ago he flew,
And left it naked there.

Dame Mary Gilmore

The Waradgery Tribe

Harried we were, and spent,
broken and falling,
ere as the cranes we went,
crying and calling.

Summer shall see the bird
backward returning;
never shall there be heard
those, who went yearning.

Emptied of us the land;
ghostly our going;
fallen like spears the hand
dropped in the throwing.

We are the lost who went,
like the cranes, crying;
hunted, lonely and spent
broken and dying.

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