

Classic Poetry Series

David Campbell

- poems -

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Harry Pearce

I sat beside the red stock route
and chewed a blade of bitter grass
and saw in mirage on the plain
a bullock wagon pass.
Old Harry Pearce was with his team.
"The flies are bad," I said to him.

The leaders felt his whip, It did
me good to hear old Harry swear,
and in the heat of noon it seemed
his bullocks walked on air.
Suspended in the amber sky
they hauled the wool to Gundagai.

He walked in Time across the plain,
and old man walking on the air,
for years he wandered in my brain;
and now he lodges there.
And he may drive his cattle still
when Time with us had had his will.

David Campbell

Men in Green

Oh, there were fifteen men in green,
Each with a tommy-gun,
Who leapt into my plane at dawn;
We rose to meet the sun.

We set our course towards the east
And climbed into the day
Till the ribbed jungle underneath
Like a giant fossil lay.

We climbed towards the distant range,
Where two white paws of cloud
Clutched at the shoulders of the pass;
The green men laughed aloud.

They did not fear the ape-like cloud
That climbed the mountain crest
And hung from ropes invisible
With lightning in its breast.

They did not fear the summer's sun
In whose hot centre lie
A hundred hissing cannon shells
For the unwatchful eye.

And when on Dobadura's field
We landed, each man raised
His thumb towards the open sky;
But to their right I gazed.

For fifteen men in jungle green
Rose from the kunai grass
And came towards the plane. My men
In silence watched them pass;
It seemed they looked upon themselves
In Times's prophetic glass.

Oh, there were some leaned on a stick
And some on stretchers lay,
But few walked on their own two feet
In the early green of day.

(They did not heed the ape-like cloud
That climbed the mountain crest;
They did not fear the summer sun
With bullets for their breast.)

Their eyes were bright, their looks were dull;
Their skin had turned to clay.
Nature had meet them in the night
And stalked them in the day.

And I think still of men in green
On the Soputa track,
With fifteen spitting tommy-guns
To keep the jungle back.

David Campbell

The Stockman

The sun was in the summer grass,
the Coolibahs* were twisted steel;
the stockman paused beneath their shade
and sat upon his heel,
and with the reins looped through his arm
he rolled tobacco in his palm.

His horse stood still, His cattle-dog
tongued in the shadow of the tree,
and for a moment on the plain
Time waited for the three,
and then the stockman licked his fag
and Time took up his solar swag.

I saw the stockman mount and ride,
across the mirage on the plain;
and still that timeless moment brought
fresh ripples to my brain;
it seemed in that distorting air
I saw his grandson sitting there.

David Campbell

Up North

Oh, Bill and Joe to the north have gone,
A green shirt on their back;
There are not many ewes and lambs
Along Kokoda track.

There are not many ewes and lambs,
But men in single file
Like sheep along a mountain pad
Walk mile on sweating mile;

And each half-hour they change the lead,
Though I have never read
Where any fat bell-whether was
Shot, in the mountains, dead.

The only sheep they muster there
Leap through the mind at night;
'Twould be as red as marking time
To change green shirt for white.

And though Bill dreams of droving now
On the drought-coloured plain,
There's little need to tap the glass
Or pray for it to rain.

They have no lack of water there
But there is a stinging tail,
For men lie dying in the grass
Along Kokoda trail.

David Campbell