

Classic Poetry Series

David Campbell

- 7 poems -

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David Campbell (16 July 1915 - 29 July 1979)

David Campbell was one of Australia's most accomplished poets.

Life

Campbell was born on 16 July 1915 at Ellerslie Station, near Adelong, New South Wales. He was the third child of Australian-born parents Alfred Campbell, a grazier and medical practitioner, and his wife Edith Madge, née Watt.

In 1930, Campbell went to The King's School, Sydney, and in 1935, with the support of the headmaster, he enrolled at Jesus College, Cambridge, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 1937. He continued to play rugby he excelled at school. His studies in English literature developed his interest in poetry.

Campbell returned to Australia from Cambridge in 1938 and on 6 November 1939 joined the Royal Australian Air Force. He had learned to fly while at Cambridge and went to train as a pilot at Point Cook. He served in New Guinea, where he was injured and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, and flew bombing missions from Darwin in the Northern Territory.

Campbell married Bonnie Edith Lawrence on 20 January 1940 at St John's Anglican Church, Toorak, Melbourne. They had two sons (including John) and a daughter, but were divorced in 1973. In 1946, he settled on a family property, Wells Station, near Canberra, and in 1961 he moved to Palerang, near Bungendore, New South Wales. In 1968, he moved again to The Run, Queanbeyan, New South Wales.

On 18 February 1974 Campbell married Judith Anne Jones in Sydney. From May to September 1975 they travelled in England and Europe, his first trip abroad since his Cambridge days.

He had many literary friends. These included, in addition to poet and editor, Douglas Stewart, historian Manning Clark, poet Rosemary Dobson, writer Patrick White, and poet and academic A. D. Hope. He was interested in painting, golf and polo, and was a keen fisherman, an activity he often shared with Douglas Stewart. Manning Clark has written about aspects of his friendship with David Campbell. Campbell wrote Clark "was an enlarger of life, not a straitener or measurer, or a life-denier" the key to him being found in "the two books he re-read each year: *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky, and *The Aunt's Story* by Patrick White. "He was the war hero, the victor in the boxing ring, the strong man in the rugby scrum, the fisherman, the horseman, the polo player who knew all about Myshkin [character from *The Idiot*] and

Theodora Goodman [character from *The Aunt's Story*]. I saw him knock out a man in the bar at Delegate for casting doubts on his manhood. The next morning I saw him cast a fly with such delicacy that it landed on the waters of the Snowy River with the grace of a butterfly."

David Campbell died of cancer on the 29th of July 1979, at the Royal Canberra Hospital.

Literary Career

While Campbell had a few poems published in Cambridge journals between 1935 and 1937, his poetry didn't start appearing regularly in print until 1942 when he started sending poems to *The Bulletin*. Six were published by 1944. It was in these years that he first became known to Douglas Stewart, with whom he formed a long-standing friendship. These early poems dealt primarily with war, but from 1946, after his move to Wells Station, "his poetry became more closely attuned to the realities of the countryside". Kramer writes that "his daily life as a grazier, his acute observations of the natural world and his deep understanding of European poetry gave him a distinctive poetic voice, learned but not didactic, harmonious but not bland, vigorous but finely tuned".

The following are representative examples of his use of European and Asian (haiku) poetic forms to capture the contemplative experience of the Monaro plains.

"For now the sharp leaves
On the tree are still
And the great blond paddocks
Come down from the hill."

"See how these autumn days begin
With spider-webs against the sun,
And frozen shadows, fiery cocks,
And starlings riding sheep-backs."

"The powdered bloom along the bough
Wavers like a candle's breath;
Where snow falls softly into snow
Iris and rivers have their birth."

"White snow daisies spring,
Snowgums glint from granite rock,
Whitebacked magpies sing."

As well as writing poetry, Campbell also edited several anthologies, including the 1966 edition of *Australian Poetry* and, in 1970, *Modern Australian Poetry*. He also wrote short stories, and became known for the support he gave to young poets.

Mullion Park

In November 2007, Mullion Park was officially opened in Gungahlin in the A.C.T., Australia. The park is located in an area which incorporates what was once Campbell's property at Wells Station. The original paddock boundary is marked by a line of remnant eucalypt trees and the original fence by ceramic tiles inlaid with barbed wire. The name of the park comes from the book of poems, *The Miracle of Mullion Hill*, which Campbell wrote when he lived at Wells Station with his family. It was published in 1956.

The park honours Campbell, "not for his work as a grazier, nor for his dedication to the Royal Australian Air Force, in which he served and was wounded as a pilot in World War II, but for his lyrical poetry about love, war and the Australian rural life". At the opening of the park, Chief Minister of the A.C.T., Jon Stanhope, said that Campbell is "often called the poet of the Monaro" and that his poetry "reflects the local landscape and was greatly influenced by his life as a farmer of the surrounding countryside". The park

incorporates excerpts from his poems, embedded in wooden pedestals and on pathways. It is intended to connect residents of Wells Station to the heritage of the region and provide a cultural as well as a recreational retreat.

Works:

Poetry

Speak with the Sun (1949)
The Miracle of Mullion Hill (1956)
Poems (1962)
Selected Poems 1942-1968 (1968)
The Branch of Dodona and Other Poems: 1969-1970 (1970)
Starting from Central Station: A Sequence of Poems (1973)
Devil's Rock and Other Poems 1970-1972 (1974)
Moscow Trefoil: poems from the Russian of Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam (1975) with Rosemary Dobson
Deaths and Pretty Cousins (1975)
The History of Australia (1976)
Encounters (1977)
Words with a Black Orpington (1978)
Selected Poems (1978)
The Man in the Honeysuckle : Poems (1979)
Seven Russian Poets: Imitations (1979)
Hardening of the Light : Selected Poems (2006)

Short stories

Flame and Shadow: Selected Stories (1959)

Sound recording

David Campbell Reads from His Own Work (1975)

Letters

Letters Lifted into Poetry: Selected Correspondence between David Campbell and Douglas Stewart, 1946-1979 (2006) edited by Jonathan Perse

At The Sheep-Dog Trials

What ancestors unite
Here in this red and white
Kelpie to define
His symmetry of line,

As crouched in burning dust
He halts both Time and beast?
The wethers stamp the ground,
At his will turn around.

He is of collie stock:
Austerity of rock
Has lent his mind and bone
The toughness of its stone.

And though for Border flocks
The collie and the fox
Fought tooth to tooth, they joined
And have the kelpie coined

Whose ears acutely set
Across the centuries yet
Hear the concordant sound
Of coupled horn and hound;

And as the moon the tides
The hidden vixen guides
With craft the blood that strains
And surges in his veins.

Those who stand and stare
At cripples in the fair
Have not the eyes to see
His blood's dignity

Where old adversaries meet,
As now on velvet feet
He moves to his master's call,
In action classical.

David Campbell

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

Mothers and Daughters

The cruel girls we loved
Are over forty,
Their subtle daughters
Have stolen their beauty;

And with a blue stare
Of cool surprise,
They mock their anxious mothers
With their mothers' eyes.

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

To The Art of Edgar Degas

Beachcomber on the shores of tears
Limning the gestures of defeat
In dancers, whores, and opera-stars –
The lonely, lighted various street

You sauntered through, oblique, perverse,
In your home territory a spy,
Accosted you and with a curse
You froze it with your Gorgon's eye.

With what tense patience you refine
The everyness of everyday
And with free colour and a line
Make my mysteries of flaccid clay!

By what strange enterprise you live!
Edgy, insatiably alone,
You choose your tenderness to give
To showgirls whom you turn to stone –

But stone that moves, tired stone that leans
To ease involuntarily the toe
Of ballet-girls like watering-cans
(Those arguers at the bar) as though

In their brief pause you found relief
From posed dilemmas of the mind-
Your grudging aristocratic grief,
The wildcat cares of going blind.

Well, walk your evening streets and look
Each last eleven at the show:
The darkening pleasures you forsook
Look back like burning windows now.

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