Classic Poetry Series

Dorothea Mackellar

- 12 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Dorothea Mackellar (1 July 1885 – 14 January 1968)

Isobel Marion Dorothea Mackellar was an Australian poet and fiction writer.

Life and Works

The only daughter of noted physician and parliamentarian Sir Charles Mackellar, she was born in Sydney in 1885. Although raised in a professional urban family, Mackellar's poetry is usually regarded as quintessential bush poetry, inspired by her experience on her brothers' farms near Gunnedah, North-West New South Wales.

Her best-known poem is My Country, written at age 19 while homesick in England, and first published in the London Spectator in 1908 under the title Core of My Heart. The second stanza of this poem is amongst the most well-known in Australia. Four volumes of her collected verse were published: The Closed Door (published in 1911, contained the first appearance of My Country under its present name); The Witch Maid, and Other Verses (1914); Dreamharbour (1923); and Fancy Dress (1926).

In addition to writing poems, Mackellar also wrote novels, one by herself, Outlaw's Luck (1913), and at least two in collaboration with Ruth Bedford. These are The Little Blue Devil (1912) and Two's Company (1914). According to Dale Spender, little has been written or is yet known about the circumstances behind this collaboration.

In the New Year's Day Honours of 1968, Dorothea Mackellar was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for her contribution to Australian literature.She died two weeks later. She is buried with her father and family in Waverley Cemetery overlooking the open ocean. A memorial to Mackellar stands in ANZAC Park in Gunnedah. A federal electorate covering half of Sydney's Northern Beaches and a street in the Canberra suburb of Cook are named in her honour. (The Canberra suburb of McKellar was not named after her, but is often assumed to have been.)

Legacy

A federal electorate covering half of Sydney's Northern Beaches is named in her honour as well as a street in the Canberra suburb of Cook. (The Canberra suburb of McKellar was not named after her, but is often assumed to have been.)

On Australia Day, 26 January 1983, a statue was unveiled in Gunnedah to commemorate Dorothea Mackellar. In conjunction with the unveiling, there was an exhibition of a series of 34 water colour paintings by Jean Isherwood

illustrating the writer's most famous poem, My Country. The watercolours were eventually put on permanent display in the Gunnedah Bicentennial Regional Gallery. Isherwood set about painting a series of oils based on the watercolours which were exhibited at the Artarmon Galleries in Sydney in 1986.

In 1984, Gunnedah resident Mikie Maas created the "Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards", which has grown into a nationwide poetry competition for Australian school students.

An Old Song

The almond bloom is overpast, the apple blossoms blow.
I never loved but one man, and I never told him so.

My flowers will never come to fruit, but I have kept my pride -
A little, cold, and lonely thing, and I have naught beside.

The spring-wind caught my flowering dreams, they lightly blew away.
I never had but one true love, and he died yesterday.

Dorothea Mackellar

Australia's Men

THERE are some that go for love of a fight
And some for love of a land,
And some for a dream of the world set free
Which they barely understand.

A drearn of the world set free from Hate--
But splendidly, one and all,
Danger they drink as 'twere wine of Life
And jest as they reel and fall.

Clean aims, rare faculties, strength and youth,
They have poured them freely forth
For the sake of the sun-steeped land they left
And the far green isle in the north.

What can we do to be worthy of them,
Now hearts are breaking for pride?
Give comfort at least to the wounded men
And the kin of the man that died.

Dorothea Mackellar

Burning Off

They're burning off at the Rampadells,
The tawny flames uprise,
With greedy licking around the trees;
The fierce breath sears our eyes.

From cores already grown furnace-hot -
The logs are well alight!
We fling more wood where the flameless heart
Is throbbing red and white.

The fire bites deep in that beating heart,
The creamy smoke-wreaths ooze
From cracks and knot-holes along the trunk
To melt in greys and blues.

The young horned moon has gone from the sky,
And night has settled down;
A red glare shows from the Rampadells,
Grim as a burning town.

Full seven fathoms above the rest
A tree stands, great and old,
A red-hot column whence fly the sparks,
One ceaseless shower of gold.

All hail the king of the fire before
He sway and crack and crash
To earth - for surely tomorrow's sun
Will see him white fine ash.

The king in his robe of falling stars,
No trace shall leave behind,
And where he stood with his silent court,
The wheat shall bow to the wind.

Dorothea Mackellar

Colour

The lovely things that I have watched unthinking,
Unknowing, day by day,
That their soft dyes have steeped my soul in colour
That will not pass away -

Great saffron sunset clouds, and larkspur mountains,
And fenceless miles of plain,
And hillsides golden-green in that unearthly
Clear shining after rain;

And nights of blue and pearl, and long smooth beaches,
Yellow as sunburnt wheat,
Edged with a line of foam that creams and hisses,
Enticing weary feet.

And emeralds, and sunset-hearted opals,
And Asian marble, veined
With scarlet flame, and cool green jade, and moonstones
Misty and azure-stained;

And almond trees in bloom, and oleanders,
Or a wide purple sea,
Of plain-land gorgeous with a lovely poison,
The evil Darling pea.

If I am tired I call on these to help me
To dream -and dawn-lit skies,
Lemon and pink, or faintest, coolest lilac,
Float on my soothed eyes.

There is no night so black but you shine through it,
There is no morn so drear,
O Colour of the World, but I can find you,
Most tender, pure and clear.

Thanks be to God, Who gave this gift of colour,
Which who shall seek shall find;
Thanks be to God, Who gives me strength to hold it,
Though I were stricken blind.

Dorothea Mackellar

Dawn

At the dawning of the day,
On the road to Gunnedah,
When the sky is pink and grey
As the wings of a wild galah,
And the last night-shadow ebbs
From the trees like a falling tide,
And the dew-hung spiderwebs
On the grass-blades spread far and wide -
Each sharp spike loaded well,
Bent down low with the heavy dew -
Wait the daily miracle
When the world is all made anew:
When the sun's rim lifts beyond
The horizon turned crystal-white,
And a sea of diamond
Is the plain to the dazzled sight.

At the dawning of the day,
To my happiness thus it fell:
That 1 went the common way,
And 1 witnessed a miracle.

Dorothea Mackellar

Fire

This life that we call our own
Is neither strong nor free;
A flame in the wind of death,
It trembles ceaselessly.

And this all we can do
To use our little light
Before, in the piercing wind,
It flickers into night:

To yield the heat of the flame,
To grudge not, but to give
Whatever we have of strength,
That one more flame may live.

Dorothea Mackellar

In A Southern Garden

WHEN the tall bamboos are clicking to the restless little breeze,
And bats begin their jerky skimming flight,
And the creamy scented blossoms of the dark pittosporum trees,
Grow sweeter with the coming of the night.

And the harbour in the distance lies beneath a purple pall,
And nearer, at the garden's lowest fringe,
Loud the water soughs and gurgles 'mid the rocks below the wall,
Dark-heaving, with a dim uncanny tinge

Of a green as pale as beryls, like the strange faint-coloured flame
That burns around the Women of the Sea:
And the strip of sky to westward which the camphorlaurels frame,
Has turned to ash-of-rose and ivory—

And a chorus rises valiantly from where the crickets hide,
Close-shaded by the balsams drooping down—
It is evening in a garden by the kindly water-side,
A garden near the lights of Sydney town!

Dorothea Mackellar

My Country

The love of field and coppice,
Of green and shaded lanes.
Of ordered woods and gardens
Is running in your veins,
Strong love of grey-blue distance
Brown streams and soft dim skies
I know but cannot share it,
My love is otherwise.

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror -
The wide brown land for me!

A stark white ring-barked forest
All tragic to the moon,
The sapphire-misted mountains,
The hot gold hush of noon.
Green tangle of the brushes,
Where lithe lianas coil,
And orchids deck the tree-tops
And ferns the warm dark soil.

Core of my heart, my country!
Her pitiless blue sky,
When sick at heart, around us,
We see the cattle die -
But then the grey clouds gather,
And we can bless again
The drumming of an army,
The steady, soaking rain.

Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the Rainbow Gold,
For flood and fire and famine,
She pays us back threefold -
Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch, after many days,
The filmy veil of greenness
That thickens as we gaze.

An opal-hearted country,
A wilful, lavish land -
All you who have not loved her,
You will not understand -
Though earth holds many splendours,

Wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country
My homing thoughts will fly.

Dorothea Mackellar

The Colours Of Light

This is not easy to understand
For you that come from a distant land
Where all thecolours are low in pitch -
Deep purples, emeralds deep and rich,
Where autumn's flaming and summer's green -
Here is a beauty you have not seen.

All is pitched in a higher key,
Lilac, topaz, and ivory,
Palest jade-green and pale clear blue
Like aquamarines that the sun shines through,
Golds and silvers, we have at will -
Silver and gold on each plain and hill,
Silver-green of the myall leaves,
Tawny gold of the garnered sheaves,
Silver rivers that silent slide,
Golden sands by the water-side,

Golden wattle, and golden broom,
Silver stars of the rosewood bloom;
Amber sunshine, and smoke-blue shade:
Opal colours that glow and fade;
On the gold of the upland grass
Blue cloud-shadows that swiftly pass;
Wood-smoke blown in an azure mist;
Hills of tenuous amethyst. . .

Oft the colours are pitched so high
The deepest note is the cobalt sky;
We have to wait till the sunset comes
For shades that feel like the beat of drums -
Or like organ notes in their rise and fall -
Purple and orange and cardinal,
Or the peacock-green that turns soft and slow
To peacock-blue as the great stars show . . .

Sugar-gum boles flushed to peach-blow pink;
Blue-gums, tall at the clearing's brink;
Ivory pillars, their smooth fine slope
Dappled with delicate heliotrope;
Grey of the twisted mulga-roots;
Golden-bronze of the budding shoots;
Tints of the lichens that cling and spread,
Nile-green, primrose, and palest red . . .

Sheen of the bronze-wing; blue of the crane;
Fawn and pearl of the lyrebird's train;
Cream of the plover; grey of the dove -
These are the hues of the land I love.

Dorothea Mackellar

The Dreamer

Over the crest of the Hill of Sleep,
Over the plain where the mists lie deep,
Into a country of wondrous things,
Enter we dreaming, and know we're kings.

Murmur or roar as it may, the stream
Laughs to the youngster who dreams his dream.
Leave him alone till his fool's heart breaks:
Dreams all are real till the dreamer wakes!

Dorothea Mackellar

The Open Sea

From my window I can see,
Where the sandhills dip,
One far glimpse of open sea.
Just a slender slip
Curving like a crescent moon—
Yet a greater prize
Than the harbour garden-fair
Spread beneath my eyes.

Just below me swings the bay,
Sings a sunny tune,
But my heart is far away
Out beyond the dune;
Clearer far the sea-gulls' cry
And the breakers' roar,
Than the little waves beneath
Lapping on the shore.

For that strip of sapphire sea
Set against the sky
Far horizons means to me—
And the ships go by
Framed between the empty sky
And the yellow sands,
While my freed thoughts follow them
Out to other lands.

All its changes who can tell?
I have seen it shine
Like a jewel polished well,
Hard and clear and fine;
Then soft lilac—and again
On another day
Glimpsed it through a veil of rain,
Shifting, drifting grey.

When the livid waters flee,
Flinching from the storm,
From my window I can see,
Standing safe and warm,
How the white foam tosses high
On the naked shore,
And the breakers' thunder grows
To a battle-roar…

Far and far I look—Ten miles?
No, for yesterday
Sure I saw the Blessed Isles
Twenty worlds away.
My blue moon of open sea,
Is it little worth?
At the least it gives to me

Keys of all the earth

Dorothea Mackellar

The Waiting Life

Since it befell, with work and strife
I had not time to live my life
I turned away from it until
Work should be done and strife be still.

My hands and head for use are free,
Nor does my own life worry me,
But docile as a spaniel waits
Until this present stress abates.

Tranquil it breathes, and waits, I know,
With all its joy contained. But oh
I hope when I have time to play
My life will not have run away!

Dorothea Mackellar