

Classic Poetry Series

Frank Dalby Davison

- poems -

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Frank Dalby Davison (23 June 1893 - 24 May 1970)

Frank Dalby Davison, also known as F.D. Davison and Freddie Davison, was an Australian novelist and short story writer. Whilst several of his works demonstrated his progressive political philosophy, he is best known as "a writer of animal stories and a sensitive interpreter of Australian bush life in the tradition of Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and Vance Palmer." His most popular works were two novels, *Man-shy* and *Dusty*, and his short stories.

Life

Davison was born in Hawthorn, Victoria, and christened as Frederick Douglas Davison. His father was Frederick Davison, a printer, publisher, editor, journalist and writer of fiction; and his mother was Amelia, née Watterson. He was their eldest child. He went to Caulfield State School, but left when he was 12, and worked on his father's land at Kinglake in the mountain range north of Melbourne, before moving to the United States of America with his family in 1909. Here Davison was apprenticed to the printing trade, and first started writing.

Between 1909 and the beginning of World War I, he travelled widely in North America and the West Indies. However, with the beginning of the war, he went to England and enlisted, serving in France with the British cavalry. He met his wife Agnes (who was known as Kay) Ede in England while he was doing officer training at Aldershot and they married in 1915. They had a son and a daughter. Davison and his family came to Australia in 1919 after the war ended, and took up a Soldier Settlement selection near Injune, Queensland. However, the farm failed, and, in 1923, he and his family moved to Sydney where he worked in real estate and as an advertising manager for his father's magazines, the *Australian* and *Australia*.

He had a romantic relationship with fellow writer, Marjorie Barnard, through the late 1930s. Barnard used an inversion of his name "Knarf" for the hero of her collaborative novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*.

During World War II, he worked in government departments in Sydney and Melbourne.

His marriage, which had been failing for some time, was dissolved, and in 1944 he married Edna Marie McNab. In 1951, they bought a farm called "Folding Hills" at Arthur's Creek (Victoria). He wrote his last major work, *The White Thorn* (1968), here.

Davison died in Melbourne on 24 May 1970.

Writing career

Davison began writing full time during the depression, adopting, at this time, the names Frank Dalby to distinguish himself from his father. He won the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal for his novel *Man-shy* in 1931.

Man-shy is "the story of a red heifer ... who learned to value freedom above everything". It was initially published in serial form in 1923–25 in his father's Australian magazine. Later, with the Depression impacting his earning ability, he tried to find a publisher. However, no-one was interested in a book "about a cow", so he published it himself. Angus and Roberston took it on after it won the Australian Literature Society's award.

During the 1930s he worked as a real-estate agent and also as a special contributor to *The Bulletin*. He produced several stories and books, including the novel *Children of the Dark People* and the short story collection *The Woman at the Mill*.

While *Man-shy* took over 7 years to be published, his last book, *The White Thorn*, took over 22 years to write. Smith wrote in 1980 that it "deals with human beings and their sexual expressions of themselves as no other Australian writer has done". The first edition was published with a cover designed by artist and friend, Clifton Pugh.

Davison was active in the Fellowship of Australian Writers and, through the 1930s, formed a close working relationship with Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw. Barnard, Eldershaw and Davison were known as the "triumvirate" for their work in developing progressive policies through the Fellowship on such issues as civil liberties and censorship. In the Acknowledgment for *Dusty* (1946) he wrote:

A few years ago I was granted a year's Fellowship by the Commonwealth Literary Fund to carry out certain work. This is the first opportunity I have had to make suitable acknowledgments. I am hoping this book will be accepted as completing the undertaking of which the volume of short stories, *The Woman at The Mill*, was the first part. This is not the novel I had in mind – perhaps it is a better one! – but it accrues from that year in which I had free time to work and grow, and for which I am grateful to my fellow citizens and the community of letters.

He was also a long-time friend of Vance and Nettie Palmer.

Davison wrote under several pseudonyms: T Bone; *The Roo*; Davison, Fred D.; Fred Davison, Junr; Fred Junr; Davison, F. Myall; Douglas, Frederick; Daly, Francis; Daniels, Frank; Sandes, John; McGarvie, Scott; F. D. D.

His novel, *Dusty* was made into a film in 1983.

Themes

His concern about the destruction of the Australian natural environment and his political interest in promoting "liberal democratic values" are reflected in his writings. "He saw literature as a means by which people might be helped to know themselves and their society as a necessary prelude to reform". Smith suggests that while much of his writing focuses on nature and the land, several stories and his last book explore the emotional and sexual relationships between men and women.

Awards

1931: Australian Literature Society Gold Medal for *Man-shy*

1938: MBE for services to literature

1939–40: Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowship

1946: Argus prize for *Dusty*

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Man-shy (1931, novel)
The Wells of Beersheba (1933)
Red Heifer: A Story of Men and Cattle (1934, novel)
Blue Coast Caravan (1935, travelogue)
Children of the Dark People (1936, novel)
Caribbean Interlude (1936, travelogue)
The Woman at the Mill (1940, short stories)
Dusty (1946, novel)
The Road to Yesterday: Collected Stories (1964, short stories)
The White Thorntree (1968, novel)
The Wells of Beersheba and Other Stories (1985, short stories)

The children of the Mist

Through the valleys, softly creeping
`Mid the tree-tops, tempest-tossed,
see the cloud-forms seeking, peeping
For the loved ones that are lost.
Not for storm or sunshine resting,
Will they slacken or desist,
Or grow weary in their questing
For the children of the mist.

Where are those children hiding?
Surely they will soon return,
In the gorge again abiding
`Mid the myrtle and the fern.
Ah! the dusky forms departed
Nevermore will keep their tryst,
And the clouds, alone, sad-hearted,
mourn the Children of the Mist.

E'en the wild bush-creatures, scattered,
Ere they die renew their race,
And the pine, by levin shattered,
Leaves an heir to take his place.
Though each forest thing, forth stealing,
Year by year the clouds have kissed,
Vainly are those white arms feeling
For the children of the mist.

Dead the race, beyond awaking,
Ere its task was well begun;
Human hearts that throbbed to breaking
Are but dust beneath the sun.
Past all dreams of vengeance-wreaking,
Blown where'er the tempests list.

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But the cloud-forms still are seeking
For the children of the mist.

Frank Dalby Davison

The Earth-Mother

COMETH a voice:—'My children, hear;
From the crowded street and the close-packed mart
I call you back with my message clear,
Back to my lap and my loving heart.
Long have ye left me, journeying on
By range and river and grassy plain,
To the teeming towns where the rest have gone—
Come back, come back to my arms again.

'So shall ye lose the foolish needs
That gnaw your souls; and my touch shall serve
To heal the ills that the city breeds,
The pallid cheek and the fretted nerve.
Treading the turf that ye once loved well,
Instead of the stones of the city's street,
Ye shall hear nor din nor drunken yell,
But the wind that croons in the ripening wheat.

'Yonder, beneath the smoke-smeared sky,
A city of half a million souls
That struggle and chaffer and strive and cry
By a sullied river that seaward rolls.
But here, blue range and full-filled creek,
And the soil made glad by the welcome rain
Waiting the plough. If peace ye seek,
Come back, come back to my arms again.

'I that am old have seen long since
Ruin of palaces made with hands
For the soldier-king and the priest and prince
Whose cities crumble in desert sands.
But still the furrow in many a clime
Yields softly under the ploughman's feet;
Still there is seeding and harvest time,
And the wind still croons in the ripening wheat.

'Where is Persepolis? Ask the Wind
That once the tresses of Thais kissed.
A stone or two you may haply find
Where Night and the Desert keep their tryst.
But the broken goblet is cast away,
And to seek for the lights that are lost is vain.
The city passes; the green fields stay—
Come back, come back to my arms again.

'The works of man are but little worth;
For a time they stand, for a space endure;
But turn once more to your mother—Earth,
My gifts are gracious, my works are sure.
Green shoot of herbage for growing herd,
And blossoming promise of fruitage sweet,
These shall not fail, if ye heed my word,

Nor the wind that croons in the ripening wheat.

`Would ye fashion a nation, whole and true,
Goodly-proportioned, sound at core?
Then this, my sons, ye must surely do—
Give city less, and country more.
Would ye rear a race to hold this land
From foemen steering across the main?
Then, children, listen and understand—
Come back, come back to my arms again.

`Your coastwise cities are passing fair—
Jetty and warehouse and banking-hall,
Tower and dome and statued square—
But who is to guard when the blow shall fall?
The men who can shoot and ride are found
Not where the clerks and the shopmen meet,
But out, where the reaper hears the sound
Of the wind that croons in the ripening wheat.

`Ye know, who have long since left the loam
For a city job in some crowded works,
That sorrow abides in the straitened home,
And Death in the stifling factory lurks.
And some, who are out of a job, must sleep
On a city bench in the driving rain.
Of happier days are ye dreaming deep?
Come back, come back to my arms again.

`There in the city, by jungle law,
Each fights for his meat till set of sun.
By the deadliest fang and the sharpest claw
The right to the largest share is won.
But here there is neither strife nor guile,
The brazen robber nor smooth-tongued cheat.
Your gold is safe—where the harvests smile,
And the wind still croons in the ripening wheat.

`I mind me once, in a sunlit land,
Lancer, Hussar, and fierce Uhlan
Came galloping in on every hand,
And poppied cornfields over-ran.
And many a sabre was stoutly plied,
And many a hero kissed the plain,
And many a hero's mother cried,
"Come back, come back to my arms again!"

`But when no longer the trumpets pealed,
And the stricken land was at rest once more,
They found a peasant who sowed his field
Nor knew that France had been at war.
E'en so, instead of the strife and pain

I give you peace, with its blessing sweet.
Come back, come back to my arms again,
For the wind still croons in the ripening wheat.'

Frank Dalby Davison

The Old Pioneers

These old friends of ours! Sixty years back,
Bearded and booted, they followed the track,
Came like their Saxon forefathers of old,
Carving a nation from waste and from wold,
Mighty of purpose and stalwart of limb,
Clove they a path through the forest so dim,
Forward, adventuring, knowing no fears--
Honour and praise to the old pioneers.

Now they are feeble and bowed are their backs,
Long laid aside are the stockwhip and axe;
Dulled though each sense is, the hearing is quick
Oft-times to catch the faint ring of the pick,
Eyes, too, are closed yet they see clear and plain
The camp and the creek and the ranges again;
Australia's first story and the world never hears,
It is locked in the hearts of the old pioneers.

Then to the workers of those distant days
Certain poor players came bringing their plays,
Lighter grew toil for the songs that they trolled,
Sweeter was life for the love-stories told,
Gone now the music, the laughter is stilled,
Audience and players together are chilled,
Yet--like the flowers--the smiles and the tears
Ever are fresh for the old pioneers.

Yes, they are old, nor of wealth have they hoard,
Heap we the fire, then, and plenish the board;
Age steals upon them and chilly life grows,
Workers and players have earned their repose.
Soon on their names all in vain we shall call,
For even the grandest old landmarks must fall.
Just a warm hand-clasp ere one disappears--
These are the last of the old pioneers.

Frank Dalby Davison

With Deaths' Prophetic Ear

Lay my rifle here beside me, set my Bible on my breast,
For a moment let the warning bugles cease;
As the century is closing I am going to my rest,
Lord, lettest Thou Thy servant go in peace.
But loud through all the bugles rings a cadence in mine ear,
And on the winds my hopes of peace are strowed.
Those winds that waft the voices that already I can hear
Of the rooi-baatjes singing on the road.

Yes, the red-coats are returning, I can hear the steady tramp,
After twenty years of waiting, lulled to sleep,
Since rank and file at Potchefstroom we hemmed them in their camp,
And cut them up at Bronkerspruit like sheep.
They shelled us at Ingogo, but we galloped into range,
And we shot the British gunners where they showed.
I guessed they would return to us, I knew the chance must change --
Hark! the rooi-baatjes singing on the road!

But now from snow-swept Canada, from India's torrid plains,
From lone Australian outposts, hither led,
Obeying their commando, as they heard the bugle's strains,
The men in brown have joined the men in red.
They come to find the colours at Majuba left and lost,
They come to pay us back the debt they owed;
And I hear new voices lifted, and I see strange colours tossed,
'Mid the rooi-baatjes singing on the road.

The old, old faiths must falter, and the old, old creeds must fail --
I hear it in that distant murmur low --
The old, old order changes, and 'tis vain for us to rail,
The great world does not want us -- we must go.
And veldt, and spruit, and kopje to the stranger will belong,
No more to trek before him we shall load;
Too well, too well, I know it, for I hear it in the song
Of the rooi-baatjes singing on the road.

Frank Dalby Davison