

Classic Poetry Series

Frank Wilmot

- poems -

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Frank Wilmot (6 April 1881 - 22 February 1942)

Frank Leslie Thomson Wilmot, who published his work under the pseudonym Furnley Maurice, was a noted Australian poet, best known for *To God: From the Warring Nations* (1917).

Early life

Wilmot was a son of Henry William Wilmot, an ironmonger and pioneer of the socialist movement in Victoria, and his wife, Elizabeth Mary Hind. He was born at Collingwood, a suburb of Melbourne, and was educated at the North Fitzroy State School. In 1895 he obtained employment at Cole's Book Arcade, Melbourne. He married Ida Meeking in 1910, and they had two sons. Wilmot gradually improved his position at the book arcade and, when the business was wound up by the executors of the Cole estate in 1929, held the position of manager.

Career

Wilmot began contributing verse to the *Tocsin*, a Melbourne Labour paper, before he was 20 and also produced his own monthly magazine called *Microbe*.

His first separate publication, *Some Verses by Frank Wilmot*, appeared in 1903, and attracted little notice. Another little volume, *Some More Verses*, was printed in 1904 but was suppressed before publication. Some years later a few copies of this volume were discovered which found their way into collectors' hands. Finding at one stage that his work was being persistently rejected, especially by *Bulletin* where the editor Alfred George Stephens was known to dislike Wilmot, Wilmot adopted the pseudonym of "Furnley Maurice", and his poems thereafter were published either anonymously or under this pseudonym.

In 1913 a slim, well-printed volume, *Unconditioned Songs*, published anonymously, attracted some attention. His next publication, *To God: from the Weary Nations*, which came out in 1917, criticised conscription. Revised and with a slightly altered title "*To God: from the Warring Nations*" the poem was later reprinted in *Eyes of Vigilance*, but in the meantime an entirely different piece of work, *The Bay and Padie Book: Kiddie Songs*, had come out (first ed. 1917, third ed. 1926). This volume was meant especially for young children, and few writers in this medium have been so successful. In *Eyes of Vigilance*, which appeared in 1920, Wilmot printed some of his best work, and in *Arrows of Longing*, published in 1921, he gathered together most of his uncollected work up to that date. In 1925 *The Gully*, a poem of about 200 lines, was published in a limited edition.

In 1929 Wilmot had to find fresh means of making a living. He had of course made very little from his poetry. On leaving Cole's Book Arcade he bought its circulating library and carried it on for about three years, also doing some bookselling. It did not pay well and early in 1932 he applied for the position of manager of the Melbourne University Press and was appointed. He carried on the press with great success until the time of his death. It was not only

that he expanded its activities very much, he made it pay. And though much of the work published was naturally educational, the press during his period published other important books and incidentally set a high standard in technical production. Though working very hard during the period after leaving Cole's, Wilmot still found time to do original work. The Gully and Other Verses, published in 1929, was the most even in quality of his volumes, and Melbourne Odes which appeared in 1934 contained the centenary ode for which he was awarded a prize of £50 in 1934.

Late life

Wilmot had a serious operation in 1934 for appendicitis, which apparently was not completely successful, as another operation was necessary about a year later. On his recovery he continued working hard, always hoping that he might have a few years of leisure in which to do original work. In 1940 he was chosen to deliver the first course of lectures on Australian literature at the University of Melbourne. He died suddenly at Melbourne on 22 February 1942. In addition to the works mentioned Wilmot published in 1922, Romance, a collection of essays in prose, which though somewhat slight are excellently written. He wrote the verses and some of the prose in Here is Faery, published in 1915, and a few single poems were issued separately. These will be found listed in Miller's Australian Literature. Among them was an essay in satire, Odes for a Curse-Speaking Choir I. Ottawar! An Ode to Humbug. He also wrote short stories and some plays, two or three of which were staged by amateurs. He collaborated with Percival Serle and R. H. Croll in the production of An Australasian Anthology, and with Professor Cowling in Australian Essays. In 1940 appeared Path to Parnassus Anthology for Schools, a charming selection of English and Australian poems with an illuminating introduction. A selection from his poetry was published in 1944.

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To God: from the Warring Nations (1917)
The Bay and Padie Book: Kiddie Songs (1917)
In Eyes of Vigilance (1920)
Arrows of Longing (1921)
The Gully and Other Works(1829)
Melbourne Odes (1934)

Echoes

I have returned into my land of day,
And lo! it is not light!
And she who claims my homage is betrayed.
I went to furious fighting in far lands
To slay the beast that followed her with leering eyes,
But surely he sailed past me on the night wave
And piled my land in silent ruin cunningly.

Australia, speak!
Surely you have not died in such a little while?
Why will you taunt me with your silences
That make all sacrifice seem in vain?

Speak in a voice of your own.
I do not understand what things you tell me
With these strange lips and foreign tones;
Is it not enough
That your wharves are piled with alien merchandise -
Must your young soul be flooded with foreign despairs?

Of old the adventurous ships
Freighted with golden visions and gallant men
Swung into our sun-splashed harbours
Bringing their woes with them,
Their woes with them.
And all our blazing suns have not burned them white
Nor sharp winds blown them clean.

While I protected your body
No one remembered your soul;
The fumes of the ancient hells have invaded your spirit,
And old reputed disaster has broken your heart.
Australia, speak!

While I have lain broken with wounds,"
In the scorching sands of the north,
Have old men come ravishing you?
Has my enemy been here?
Speak to me;
Name me the betrayers!
Yet, mayhap you are learning to adore them!

I have gone with vain women,
And women veiled and strange, in foreign lands,
But always I dreamed of you,
And I said to the women I fondled,
'Oh, there's an adorable lady fairer than you!'
Now, when I return to these shores,
Something is gone from your grace,
And your voice it is smothered and strange;
The poisonous winds have soiled the shining hair
Of the fair lady I went out to save.

She does not speak in a voice that is her own,
But mumbles echoes of things half comprehended,
And round her red lips hover alien words.
Is it your hear that has changed,
Or, from the things I have suffered,
Have I acquired new vision?

I have returned into a world of shadows,
I have returned into a land of echoes,
A thin-drawn filament of echoed impulses
Smothers your gleaming spaces.
Echoes of false, unworthy things
That blast the older worlds I've loitered in
Hide you from me,
Hold you from me,
Blast your green gullies,
Cloud your arbour'd roads
For you I have struggled and sinned,
Stood firmly against the lure of a comforting death,

And now you are dying, betrayed,
Bloodless, pale as a dream,
Murmuring foreign ideas,
Brooding on the Romanoffs, the Syndicates, the Boyne!
Shuddering in echoes of ceaseless war and causeless revolution,
Drowned in echoes of reflected troubles.
Dying amid your groves of golden trees,
Surrounded by the unregarded dawn!
So do I see you now!
Is it your heart that has changed,
Or, from the things I have suffered,
Have I acquired new vision?

Australia, speak!
I have brought you trinkets and trophies and banners,
New law, new impulses, new dreams;
Droves of worshippers utter your name in awe,
The name I have written in blood on the moving sands,
In stars on the blue night's face
That the sea calls back to the blue.

Australia, speak!
Is this the country I went forth to save?
Do you remember my name,
Or is my memory lost in your surging echoes,
And your voice, my voice, silent for evermore?
Waken and speak to me,
For the dawn, all unregarded,
Fades ...

Of old the adventurous ships
Swung into our sun-splashed harbours

Bringing their woes

Frank Wilmot

Edelweiss

THERE grows a white, white flower
By the wild Alps of romance;
And who would reach its dainty leaves
Takes life and death in chance.

There is a dark, dark cavern
Where a woman goes alone,
Takes hope and peril in her hand
And fights Death on his throne.

To our heart's breathless calling
She comes from the cavern wild,
Holding in her exhausted arms
A small, white, blossoming child.

Frank Wilmot

Nursery Rhyme

One year, two year, three year, four,
Comes a khaki gentleman knocking at the door.
'Any little boys at home, send them out to me
To train them and brain them in battles yet to be.'

When a little boy is born feed him, train him so.
Put him in a cattle pen and wait for him to grow.
When he's nice and plump and dear, and sensible and sweet,
Throw him in the trenches for the great grey rats to eat.
Toss him in the cannon's mouth, cannons fancy best
Tender little boys' flesh that's easy to digest.

Mother rears her family on two pounds ten a week.
Teaches them to wash themselves, teaches them to speak.
Rears them with a heart's love, rears them to be men.
Grinds her fingers to the bone, and then... what then?

But parents who must rear the boys the cannons love to slay,
Also pay for cannons that blow other boys away.
Parsons tell them that their sons have just been blown to bits.
Patriotic parents must all laugh like fits.

Rear the boys for honest men and send them out to die!
Where's the coward father who would dare raise a cry?
Any gentleman's aware folk rear their children for
Blunderers and plunderers to mangle in a war!

Five year, six year, seven year, eight.
'Hurry up you little chaps, the captain's at the gate!'

Frank Wilmot

Progress

THEY'VE builded wooden timber tracks,
And a trolly with screaming brakes
Noses into the secret bush,
Into the birdless brooding bush,
And the tall old gums it takes.
And down in the sunny valley,
The snorting saw screams slow;
O bush that nursed my people,
O bush that cursed my people,
That flayed and made my people,
I weep to watch you go

Frank Wilmot

The Last Port

I WROUGHT and battled and wept, near and afar
I scanned the secret of the bud and star.

Hill-road and desert, and the hurrying street
Know well the impress of my restless feet!

Then some one came with soft, caressing glance,
Slow, like a woman out of all romance.

Love closed around me these warm, folded wings—
That was the end of all my wanderings.

Frank Wilmot