

Classic Poetry Series

Frederick Robert Higgins

- 10 poems -

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Frederick Robert Higgins (24 April 1896 - 6 January 1941)

Frederick Robert Higgins (24 April 1896 - 6 January 1941) was an Irish poet and theatre director.

Higgins was born on the west coast of Ireland in Foxford, which is located in County Mayo. He grew up in Ballivor in County Meath, and then spent the largest part of his adult life in Dublin, in a house he had built beside the River Dodder in Rathfarnham. His health was poor, and though his friends were inclined to regard him as a hypochondriac, his prediction that he would die young was accurate.

Career

Higgins was a student of William Butler Yeats and served on the board of the Abbey Theatre from 1935 until his death. His best-known book of poetry is *The Gap of Brightness* (1940). He is also well known for his poem, *Father and Son*. He wrote a moving elegy for his fellow poet Pádraic Ó Conaire. He was generally acknowledged as a fine poet, but was less successful in his Abbey Theatre work: Frank O'Connor said unkindly that Higgins could not direct a children's poetry recitation.

He was a popular and convivial man- even Frank O'Connor, who came to regard him with deep suspicion, admitted that he was a delightful person to meet. His circle of friends included many of the leading Irish literary figures of his time, including Yeats, Pádraic Ó Conaire, George William Russell, Lennox Robinson, and for a time Frank O'Connor. O'Connor however came to regard Higgins as untrustworthy and a troublemaker, and describes him unflatteringly in his memoir *My Father's Son*. For Yeats, at least Higgins seems to have had genuine affection, once remarking that he never left Yeats' house without "feeling like a thousand dollars". He was capable of great kindness and generosity to younger writers like Patrick Kavanagh.

He died suddenly of a heart attack in January 1941.

Works:

His five collections of poems are:

- Salt Air (1924)
- Island Blood (1925)[5]
- The Dark Breed (1927)
- Arable Holdings (1933)
- The Gap of Brightness (1940)

All Soul's Even

THE grey air was thinning
Over the red lake,
Shading pale herons
Scarcely awake;
Until on still grasses,
On shores of cold dew,
The bright ring of sunset
More brightly grew.

Then mooring my curragh
In yew trees awhile,
I crushed through the wet dusk
Of a deep isle;
And cleaving boughs over
One moonless place,
I stood in the pale light
Of a pale face.

That face it moved gently
As dew on the air;
'O come,' she said softly,
Her eyes told me where;
Her words they grew dreamy,
Her voice gave no fear-
The voice of my true love
Dead for a year!

I loosened my curragh
From a yew bough,
Surrounded by music-
I scarcely hear now
Away on grey waters,
Away on the lake,
And half of my senses
Barely awake.

Frederick Robert Higgins

Chinese Winter

From these bare trees
The sticks of last year's nests
Print sad characters against the moon;
While wind-blown moonlight,
Stripping fields to silver,
Scrawls December on each frozen pool.

Light washed on each tree
Roots it in black shadow,
As last year's love now roots me in black night;
And where love danced
Footprints of fiery moments
Flash out memorials in silent ice.

Frederick Robert Higgins

Connemara

THE soft rain is falling
Round bushy isles,
Veiling the waters
Over wet miles,
And hushing the grasses
Where plovers call,
While soft clouds are falling
Over all.

I pulled my new curragh
Through the clear sea
And left the brown sailings
Far behind me,
For who would not hurry
Down to the isle,
Where Una has lured me
With a smile.

She moves through her sheiling
Under the haws,
Her movements are softer
Than kitten's paws;
And shiny blackberries
Sweeten the rain,
Where I haunt her beaded
Window-pane.

I would she were heeding-
Keeping my tryst-
That soft moon of amber
Blurred in the mist,
And rising the plovers
Where salleys fall,
Till slumbers come hushing
One and all.

Frederick Robert Higgins

Elopement

Now that the grey wet of the road makes quiet
Each step we take, ah, there can float
No stir in the air, but the stir of a cuckoo
Hopping its double note!
So hurry, black darling; from this sharp parish
We'll swiftly walk, with love as our fare
Until the far blue walls of the mountains
Are gapped with yellow air

It's down the hazy pale slabs of water,
Through the bushy towns we'll quietly go -
Just telling each hour by the passing colour
On the mountains of Mayo!
And soon on Bailassa you'll grow quite happy:
Its river gardens will shelter none
Who eyed your secret, where barren valleys
Were harvesting the sun

O maybe we'll live a while in Killala,
Where few things change with tide and tree,
Where love has been weaned and the streets in mildew
Just hobble to the lean sea!
There even my jealousy would believe you -
Were you ever so dreamy after the men
Of a town that yawned as the French marched through it
And never woke since then!

So hurry, my love, sunset may be shadowed
By one cloud roosting on a hill wind!
Ah hurry, black darling, and near the lake water -
With Lahardaun behind -
By moonlight we'll rest and maybe love's hunger
We'll break to the nod of a shy bulrush;
So may tonight pull sleep on our senses
In the spilt shadow of a bush.

Frederick Robert Higgins

Father and Son

Only last week, walking the hushed fields
Of our most lovely Meath, now thinned by November,
I came to where the road from Laracor leads
To the Boyne river-that seems more lake than river,
Stretched in uneasy light and stript of reeds.

And walking longside an old weir
Of my people's, where nothing stirs-only the shadowed
Leaden flight of a heron up the lean air-
I went unmanly with grief, knowing how my father,
Happy though captive in years, walked last with me there.

Yes, happy in Meath with me for a day
He walked, taking stock of herds hid in their own breathing;
And naming colts, gusty as wind, once steered by his hand,
Lightnings winked in the eyes that were half shy in greeting
Old friends-the wild blades, when he gallivanted the land.

For that proud, wayward man now my heart breaks-
Breaks for that man whose mind was a secret eyrie,
Whose kind hand was sole signet of his race,
Who curbed me, scorned my green ways, yet increasingly loved me
Till Death drew its grey blind down his face.

And yet I am pleased that even my reckless ways
Are living shades of his rich calms and passions-
Witnesses for him and for those faint namesakes
With whom now he is one, under yew branches,
Yes, one in a graven silence no bird breaks.

Frederick Robert Higgins

Muineen Water

I know a small lake that sails the palest shadows,
Trailing their frail keels along its waveless sand;
And when isles of grey turf are sunning in its shallows
The far hill is a blue ghost on that land.

Down there my wild heart is startled by the quiet:
The very stones are spying; each tree is a pry;
The light declares against me and exiled from brightness
I stray from those waters invaded by the sky.

But when the sedges fling their bridge of whispers
On waves no moon has hooked, then surely I find,
As that lake into its own dim presence,
A dark calm sinks into my mind.

Frederick Robert Higgins

O You Among Women

When pails empty the last brightness
Of the well, at twilight-time,
and you are there among women -
O mouth of silence,
Will you come with me, when I sign,
to the far green wood, that fences
A lake inlaid with light?

To be there, O, lost in each other,
While day melts in airy water,
And the drake-headed pike - a shade
In the Waves' pale stir!
For love is there, under the breath,
As a coy star is there in the quiet
Of the wood's blue eye.

Frederick Robert Higgins

Padraic O'Conaire Gaelic Storyteller

They've paid the last respects in sad tobacco
And silent is this wakehouse in its haze;
They've paid the last respects; and now their whiskey
Flings laughing words on mouths of prayer and praise;
And so young couples huddle by the gables.
O let them grope home through the hedgy night -
Alone I'll mourn my old friend, while the cold dawn
Thins out the holy candlelight.

Respects are paid to one loved by the people;
Ah, was he not - among our mighty poor -
The sudden wealth cast on those pools of darkness,
Those bearing, just, a star's faint signature;
And so he was to me, close friend, near brother,
Dear Padraic of the wide and sea-cold eyes -
So, lovable, so courteous and noble,
The very west was in his soft replies.

They'll miss his heavy stick and stride in Wicklow -
His story-talking down Winetavern Street,
Where old men sitting in the wizen daylight
Have kept an edge upon his gentle wit;
While women on the grassy streets of Galway,
Who hearken for his passing - but in vain,
Shall hardly tell his step as shadows vanish
Through archways of forgotten Spain.

Ah, they'll say, Padraic's gone again exploring;
But now down glens of brightness, O he'll find
An alehouse overflowing with wise Gaelic
That's braced in vigour by the bardic mind,
And there his thoughts shall find their own forefathers -
In minds to whom our heights of race belong,
In crafty men, who ribberd a ship or turned
The secret joinery of song.

Alas, death mars the parchment of his forehead;
And yet for him, I know, the earth is mild -
The windy fidgets of September grasses
Can never tease a mind that loved the wild;
So drink his peace - this grey juice of the barley
Runs with a light that ever pleased his eye -
While old flames nod and gossip on the hearthstone
And only the young winds cry.

Frederick Robert Higgins

Song for the Clatter-Bones

God rest that Jewy woman,
Queen Jezebel, the bitch
Who peeled the clothes from her shoulder-bones
Down to her spent teats
As she stretched out of the window
Among the geraniums, where
She chaffed and laughed like one half daft
Titivating her painted hair—

King Jehu he drove to her,
She tipped him a fancy beck;
But he from his knacky side-car spoke,
'Who'll break that dewlapped neck?'
And so she was thrown from the window;
Like Lucifer she fell
Beneath the feet of the horses and they beat
The light out of Jezebel.

That corpse wasn't planted in clover;
Ah, nothing of her was found
Save those grey bones that Hare-foot Mike
Gave me for their lovely sound;
And as once her dancing body
Made star-lit princes sweat,
So I'll just clack: though her ghost lacks a back
There's music in the old bones yet.

Frederick Robert Higgins

The Dark Breed

WITH those bawneen men I'm one,
In the grey dusk-fall,
Watching the Galway land
Sink down in distress-
With dark men, talking of grass,
By a loose stone wall,
In murmurs drifting and drifting
To loneliness.

Over this loneliness,
Wild riders gather their fill
Of talking on beasts and on fields
Too lean for a plough,
Until, more grey than the grey air,
Song drips from a still,
Through poteen, reeling the dancing-
Ebbing the grief now!

Just, bred from the cold lean rock,
Those fellows have grown;
And only in that grey fire
Their lonely days pass
To dreams of far clovers
And cream-gathering heifers, alone
Under the hazels of moon-lighters,
Clearing the grass.

Again in the darkness,
Dull knives we may secretly grease,
And talk of blown horns on clovers
Where graziers have lain;
But there rolls the mist,
With sails pulling wind from the seas-
No bullion can brighten that mist,
O brood of lost Spain.

So we, with the last dark men,
Left on the rock grass,
May brazen grey loneliness
Over a poteen still
Or crowd on the bare chapel floor
Hearing late Mass,
To loosen that hunger
Broken land never can fill.

Frederick Robert Higgins