

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **James Lister Cuthbertson**

**- 9 poems -**

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### **James Lister Cuthbertson (8 May 1851 – 18 January 1910)**

James Lister Cuthbertson was a Scottish-Australian poet and schoolteacher.

James Cuthbertson was born in Glasgow, Scotland, the eldest son of William Gilmour Cuthbertson and his wife, Jane Agnes Cuthbertson. James was educated at the secondary school, Trinity College, Glenalmond, Perthshire, where he played on the school cricket team. He studied for the Indian civil service, and having been admitted as a probationer went on to Merton College, University of Oxford, England. He failed to pass a necessary examination and was obliged to abandon the idea of a career in India. His father had become manager of the Bank of South Australia at Adelaide, and in 1874 Cuthbertson decided to go to Australia also.

In 1875 Cuthbertson joined the staff of the Geelong Grammar School as classical master under the pretense that he had completed his degree at Oxford. He founded the School Quarterly, to which he contributed many poems, and the first collection of these was published at Geelong under the title Grammar School Verses in 1879, an exceedingly rare little pamphlet not listed in the bibliographies of either Serle or Miller. In 1882 he returned to England and continued his course at Oxford, graduating B.A. in 1885. He immediately returned to Australia and rejoined the staff of Geelong Grammar School. In 1893 Barwon Ballads by "C" was published in Melbourne, and at the end of 1896 Cuthbertson was encouraged to resign his position by the new Head Master Leonard Harford Lindon, who found his erratic behaviour unacceptable, and Cuthbertson agreed to do so. He had enjoyed a close relationship with the students of the school and the former Head Master, John Bracebridge Wilson, however, his alcoholism was well known and boys were placed on "Cuthy duty", which involved at times pulling him out of the gutter. After a visit to England he lived for a period at Geelong and then near Melbourne, still occasionally sending verse to the school magazine. He died suddenly from an overdose of veronal while staying with a friend at Mt Gambier on 18 January 1910. After his death a memorial edition of his poems, Barwon Ballads and School Verses, with portrait frontispiece, was published by members of the Geelong Grammar School.

Much of Cuthbertson's work is occasional verse, only of interest to old boys of the school he loved so much and of a generally low standard; but he sometimes wrote verse with simplicity and restraint, which gives him a place among the poets of Australia. He is represented in several anthologies. As a school-master he was a strong influence, and set standards which have become traditions of the school.

Works:

Barwon Ballads and School Verses (1910)

## At Cape Schanck

Down to the lighthouse pillar  
The rolling woodland comes,  
Gay with the gold of she-oaks  
And the green of the stunted gums,  
With the silver-grey of honeysuckle,  
With the wasted bracken red,  
With a tuft of softest emerald  
And a cloud-flecked sky o'erhead.

We climbed by ridge and boulder,  
Umber and yellow scarred,  
Out to the utmost precipice,  
To the point that was ocean-barred,  
Till we looked below on the fastness  
Of the breeding eagle's nest,  
And Cape Wollomai opened eastward  
And the Otway on the west.

Over the mirror of azure  
The purple shadows crept,  
League upon league of rollers  
Landward evermore swept,  
And burst upon gleaming basalt,  
And foamed in cranny and crack,  
And mounted in sheets of silver,  
And hurried reluctant back.

And the sea, so calm out yonder,  
Wherever we turned our eyes,  
Like the blast of an angel's trumpet  
Rang out to the earth and skies,  
Till the reefs and the rocky ramparts  
Throbbled to the giant fray,  
And the gullies and jutting headlands  
Were bathed in a misty spray.

Oh, sweet in the distant ranges,  
To the ear of inland men,  
Is the ripple of falling water  
In sassafras-haunted glen,  
The stir in the ripening cornfield  
That gently rustles and swells,  
The wind in the wattle sighing,  
The tinkle of cattle bells.

But best is the voice of ocean,  
That strikes to the heart and brain,  
That lulls with its passionate music  
Trouble and grief and pain,  
That murmurs the requiem sweetest  
For those who have loved and lost,  
And thunders a jubilant anthem

To brave hearts tempest-tossed.

That takes to its boundless bosom  
The burden of all our care,  
That whispers of sorrow vanquished,  
Of hours that may yet be fair,  
That tells of a Harbour of Refuge  
Beyond life's stormy straits,  
Of an infinite peace that gladdens,  
Of an infinite love that waits.

James Lister Cuthbertson

## Australian Federata

AUSTRALIA! land of lonely lake  
And serpent-haunted fen;  
Land of the torrent and the fire  
And forest-sundered men:  
Thou art not now as thou shalt be  
When the stern invaders come,  
In the hush before the hurricane,  
The dread before the drum.  
A louder thunder shall be heard  
Than echoes on thy shore,  
When o'er the blackened basalt cliffs  
The foreign cannon roar—  
When the stand is made in the sheoaks' shade  
When heroes fall for thee,  
And the creeks in gloomy gullies run  
Dark crimson to the sea:

When under honeysuckles gray,  
And wattles' swaying gold,  
The stalwart arm may strike no more,  
The valiant heart is cold—  
When thou shalt know the agony,  
The fever, and the strife  
Of those who wrestle against odds  
For liberty and life:

Then is the great Dominion born,  
The seven sisters bound,  
From Sydney's greenly wooded port  
To lone King George's Sound—  
Then shall the islands of the south,  
The lands of bloom and snow,  
Forth from their isolation come  
To meet the common foe.

Then, only then—when after war  
Is peace with honour born,  
When from the bosom of the night  
Comes golden-sandalled morn,  
When laurelled victory is thine,  
And the day of battle done,  
Shall the heart of a mighty people stir,  
And Australia be as one.

James Lister Cuthbertson

## **Corona Inutilis**

I TWINED a wreath of heather white  
To bind my lady's hair,  
And deemed her locks in even light  
Would well the burden bear;  
But when I saw the tresses brown,  
And found the face so fair,  
I tore the wreath, and left the crown  
Of beauty only there.

James Lister Cuthbertson

## Ode to Apollo

"Tandem venias precamur  
Nube candentes humeros amictus  
Augur Apollo."

Lord of the golden lyre  
Fraught with the Dorian fire,  
Oh! fair-haired child of Leto, come again;  
And if no longer smile  
Delphi or Delos' isle,  
Come from the depth of thine Aetnean glen,  
Where in the black ravine  
Thunders the foaming green  
Of waters writhing far from mortals' ken;  
Come o'er the sparkling brine,  
And bring thy train divine --  
The sweet-voiced and immortal violet-crowned Nine.

For here are richer meads,  
And here are goodlier steeds  
Than ever graced the glorious land of Greece;  
Here waves the yellow corn,  
Here is the olive born --  
The gray-green gracious harbinger of peace;  
Here too hath taken root  
A tree with golden fruit,  
In purple clusters hangs the vine's increase,  
And all the earth doth wear  
The dry clear Attic air  
That lifts the soul to liberty, and frees the heart from care.

Or if thy wilder mood  
Incline to solitude,  
Eternal verdure girds the lonely hills,  
Through the green gloom of ferns  
Softly the sunset burns,  
Cold from the granite flow the mountain rills;  
And there are inner shrines  
Made by the slumberous pines,  
Where the rapt heart with contemplation fills,  
And from wave-stricken shores  
Deep wistful music pours  
And floods the tempest-shaken forest corridors.

Oh, give the gift of gold  
The human heart to hold  
With liquid glamour of the Lesbian line;  
With Pindar's lava glow,  
With Sophocles' calm flow,  
Or Aeschylean rapture airy fine;  
Or with thy music's close  
Thy last autumnal rose  
Theocritus of Sicily, divine;

O Pythian Archer strong,  
Time cannot do thee wrong,  
With thee they live for ever, thy nightingales of song.

We too are island-born;  
Oh, leave us not in scorn --  
A songless people never yet was great.  
We, suppliants at thy feet,  
Await thy muses sweet  
Amid the laurels at thy temple gate,  
Crownless and voiceless yet,  
But on our brows is set  
The dim unwritten prophecy of fate,  
To mould from out of mud  
An empire with our blood,  
To wage eternal warfare with the fire and flood.

Lord of the minstrel choir,  
Oh, grant our hearts' desire,  
To sing of truth invincible in might,  
Of love surpassing death  
That fears no fiery breath,  
Of ancient inborn reverence for right,  
Of that sea-woven spell  
That from Trafalgar fell  
And keeps the star of duty in our sight:  
Oh, give the sacred fire,  
And our weak lips inspire  
With laurels of thy song and lightnings of thy lyre.

James Lister Cuthbertson

## **Solitude**

This is the maiden Solitude, too fair  
For mortal eyes to gaze on--she who dwells  
In the lone valley where the water wells  
Clear from the marble, where the mountain air  
Is resinous with pines, and white peaks bare  
Their unpolluted bosoms to the stars,  
And holy Reverence the passage bars  
To meaner souls who seek to enter there;  
Only the worshipper at Nature's shrine  
May find that maiden waiting to be won,  
With broad calm brow and meek eyes of the dove,  
May drink the rarer ether all divine,  
And, earthly toils and earthly troubles done,  
May win the longed-for sweetness of her love.

James Lister Cuthbertson

## **The Australian Sunrise**

The Morning Star paled slowly, the Cross hung low to the sea,  
And down the shadowy reaches the tide came swirling free,  
The lustrous purple blackness of the soft Australian night,  
Waned in the gray awakening that heralded the light;  
Still in the dying darkness, still in the forest dim  
The pearly dew of the dawning clung to each giant limb,  
Till the sun came up from ocean, red with the cold sea mist,  
And smote on the limestone ridges, and the shining tree-tops kissed;  
Then the fiery Scorpion vanished, the magpie's note was heard,  
And the wind in the she-oak wavered, and the honeysuckles stirred,  
The airy golden vapour rose from the river breast,  
The kingfisher came darting out of his crannied nest,  
And the bulrushes and reed-beds put off their sallow gray  
And burnt with cloudy crimson at dawning of the day.

James Lister Cuthbertson

## **The Bush**

GIVE us from dawn to dark  
Blue of Australian skies,  
Let there be none to mark  
Whither our pathway lies.

Give us when noontide comes  
Rest in the woodland free—  
Fragrant breath of the gums,  
Cold, sweet scent of the sea.

Give us the wattle's gold  
And the dew-laden air,  
And the loveliness bold  
Loneliest landscapes wear.

These are the haunts we love,  
Glad with enchanted hours,  
Bright as the heavens above,  
Fresh as the wild bush flowers.

James Lister Cuthbertson

## To a Billy

OLD BILLY—battered, brown and black  
With many days of camping,  
Companion of the bulging sack,  
And friend in all our tramping:  
How often on the Friday night—  
Your cubic measure testing—  
With jam and tea we stuffed you tight  
Before we started nesting!  
How often, in the moonlight pale,  
Through gums and gullies toiling,  
We've been the first the hill to scale,  
The first to watch you boiling;  
When at the lane the tent was spread  
The silver wattle under,  
And early shafts of rosy red  
Cleft sea-born mists asunder!

And so, old Billy, you recall  
A host of sun-burnt faces,  
And bring us back again to all  
The best of camping places.  
True flavour of the bush you bear,  
Of camp and its surrounding,  
Of freedom and of open air,  
Of healthy life abounding.

You bring us more—with those we love  
We watched you boil and bubble,  
And in the sunny skies above  
Forgot each schoolboy trouble  
So not without a kindly glance  
We eye you in the study,  
Although you've met with some mischance,  
Although you're black and muddy!

James Lister Cuthbertson

## **Wattle and Myrtle**

Gold of the tangled wilderness of wattle,  
Break in the lone green hollows of the hills,  
Flame on the iron headlands of the ocean,  
Gleam on the margin of the hurrying rills.

Come with thy saffron diadem and scatter  
Odours of Araby that haunt the air,  
Queen of our woodland, rival of the roses,  
Spring in the yellow tresses of thy hair.

Surely the old gods, dwellers on Olympus,  
Under thy shining loveliness have strayed,  
Crowned with thy clusters, magical Apollo,  
Pan with his reedy music may have played.

Surely within thy fastness, Aphrodite,  
She of the sea-ways, fallen from above,  
Wandered beneath thy canopy of blossom,  
Nothing disdainful of a mortal's love.

Aye, and Her sweet breath lingers on the wattle,  
Aye, and Her myrtle dominates the glade,  
And with a deep and perilous enchantment  
Melts in the heart of lover and of maid.

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