Classic Poetry Series

James Martin Devaney

- 7 poems -

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James Martin Devaney (31 May 1890 - 14 August 1976)

James Martin Devaney, poet, novelist, journalist and teacher, was born on 31 May 1890 at Sandhurst, Victoria, fourth child of Patrick Devaney, a labourer from Ireland, and his native-born wife Mary, née Conroy. Educated at Bendigo and at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, Sydney, in 1904 James entered the college's Marist Brothers' juniorate. In 1915 he made his final vows and took the religious name Fabian Joseph. Trained as a teacher, from 1911 he successively served in schools in Sydney, South Australia and New Zealand. Brother Fabian contracted severe tuberculosis and returned to Sydney in 1919 to teach at Darlinghurst. His Superior so relentlessly opposed adequate medical treatment that, driven to the point of despair, Devaney left the Order in July 1921. He recuperated in a sanatorium near Rockhampton, Queensland, and at the Diamantina Hospital, Brisbane. On 29 November 1924 at the Church of Mary Immaculate, Annerley, he married his nurse Phyllis Norah de Winton; they were to remain childless.

Living mostly in the Brisbane district, and at times in Sydney and at the Blue Mountains, Devaney established a career as a freelance journalist. Under the pen-name 'Fabian', from 1924 to 1943 he contributed a nature column to the Brisbane Courier (Courier-Mail from 1933) which was syndicated in other Queensland newspapers. He had a long association with the Catholic Leader as editor of its literary page and on occasions was acting-editor.

His volumes of verse, Fabian (Melbourne, 1923), Earth Kindred (Melbourne, 1931), Dark Road (Melbourne, 1938) and Where the Wind Goes (Sydney, 1939), established him as a fine lyric poet, well regarded by contemporary critics. Poems (Sydney, 1950) brought together selections from his earlier works and from Freight of Dreams which had been printed in Melbourne, but not released, in 1946. In Poetry in Our Time (Melbourne, 1952) he confronted modernism and forcefully expounded his own beliefs, but was seen by many critics as reactionary. Although his two historical novels, Currency Lass (Sydney, 1927) and Washdirt (Melbourne, 1946), were less successful, a volume of vivid and imaginative stories based on Aboriginal lore, Vanished Tribes (Sydney, 1929), enjoyed popular success; it was later used in schools and was an influence in the formation of the Jindyworobak movement. The New Law (Brisbane, 1955), a dramatic dialogue set in biblical times, received little critical attention.

Devaney played a leading role in the vigorous local literary community of the 1930s and 1940s: he provided a focus for the Catholic Poetry Society and was president (1944-45) of the Queensland Authors' and Artists' Association. While John Shaw Neilson convalesced in Devaney's Brisbane home in 1941, Devaney helped to transcribe his poems. His spirited defence of Neilson's painstaking craftsmanship—Shaw Neilson (Sydney, 1944)—disposed of

criticism of Neilson as an 'instinctive warbler' and a 'thoughtless mystic'. In 1947 he edited the Unpublished Poems of Shaw Neilson (Sydney). That year he delivered lectures under the auspices of the Commonwealth Literary Fund, from which he subsequently received a pension. He supported the writing community through lectures and workshops, encouraged writers such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) and assisted others financially in the publication of their works. In 1958, in company with Professor Manning Clark and Judah Waten, he represented Australian writers on a visit to the Soviet Union.

Having interrupted his journalism, Devaney found it difficult to obtain the same work after World War II. In 1946 he had returned to teaching, first in Victoria and then at pastoral stations in Queensland. He resigned from his last post in February 1962 to nurse his wife. She died from a drug overdose in July. Her addiction had resulted in their virtual separation from the mid-1940s, but he had continued to hope for the eventual restoration of their domestic life. Tall, spare, gentlemanly and modest, Devaney was a humanitarian with a deep-rooted sense of justice. He remained a staunch Catholic, but no sectarian, who opposed intolerance and narrow-mindedness within the Church. Never afraid to speak his mind, he supported the Labor Party, advocated 'a democracy free from the monarchy' and was reputed to have declined appointment as M.B.E. in 1968. He died on 14 August 1976 in Brisbane and was buried in Redcliffe cemetery.

Works:

Fabian: Poems, Melbourne: Lothian, 1923
The Currency Lass : a Tale of the Convict Days, Sydney: Cornstalk, 1927
The Vanished Tribes, Sydney: Cornstalk, 1929
The Girl Oona, and Other Tales of the Australian Blacks, Sydney: Cornstalk Publishing Co., 1929
The Witch-Doctor, and Other Tales of the Australian Blacks, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1930
I-rinka the Messenger, and Other Tales of the Australian Blacks, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1930
Earth Kindred, Melbourne: Frank Wilmot, Coles Library, 1931
Debutantes: a poem, Hawthorn East, Victoria: The Hawthorn Press, (1939?)
Dark Road, Hawthorn East, Victoria: Hawthorn Press, 1938,
Where the Wind Goes, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1939
Shaw Neilson, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1944
Washdirt: a novel of old Bendigo, Melbourne: Georgian House, 1946
Poems, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1950

A Dedication

Because I went the lone ways
Among the tall trees,
Because I loved the blue days,
The bird melodies,
Deemed you I did our love wrong
In loving these too?
Ah, every forest love song
Was sung, love, for you.
The green slope, the sky above,
The wild forest lore-
All these were but the mind's love:
The deep heart has more.
And were you rival of the wren?
Resentful of the dawn?
Ah, what would these avail, then,
If you, dear, were gone?
The wild joy that things possess
Would seem out of place,
And all beauty meaningless
For want of one face;
The wren's lilt for lack of you
Would wring the heart's core,
And stars upon the night's blue
Would move me no more.

James Martin Devaney

Dark Road

I will be your stay
When the feet falter.
I will be your stay
When the tears blind.
Love will sweeten yet
Though the friend alter,
And the world’s unkind.
Not alone you go this way.
Hold my hand on the dark road.
I will be your courage: would the load
On me might lay.
We will share the dust
Who have shared heaven,
Nearer now in trust
That the need calls.
I will be your stay
Till the path fail us,
Till the night veil us,
And the silence falls.

James Martin Devaney

Dirrawan the Song-Maker

Dirrawan went into the bush to spear waat,
but he forgot about waat the red wallaby.
he thought about dirridirri the small bird and deereeree the wagtail
he thought about wonning the lightning and tumberumba the thunder.

He did not spear anything at all.

Dirrawan went to the Long Brown Water to catch makora.
he thought about balleballea the silence of the night,
he thought about ballanda the long time ago.

He did not catch any fish, he brought back a new song to the gunyahs.

James Martin Devaney

Outlines

The tufted gums along the rise
Stand black against the evening skies.
And in the red west sombreing
As daylight dies,
A simple moon-the loveliest thing.
I love outlines. It may be
Some old wise heritage in me,
For well we know that finite mind
Calls for the bounded and defined.
Though random fancy loves to range
The aimless mists of dawn, and strange
Lovely illusions in the sky
That charm and lie,
Something there is in mortal man
Must have a margin and a plan;
And Truth the tyrant has decreed
For human need,
Limit and form since thought began.
This long bold mountain line is true,
But not those changing whims I see
Gleamy and vague and visionary
In air-built blue.
Deep in the soul we understand
Our nature's mystical demand
For the old sane austerities:
O pilgrim of a homeless land,
Hold fast to these.
Across the stumbling centuries
The eyes of men turn backward still
To a firm Cross upon a hill.

James Martin Devaney

The Bunyip

Oh, came you up by the place of dread
(west red, and the moon low down)
where no winds blow and the birds have fled
and the gum stands dead and its arms gleam white,
and the tribe sneak by with a stealthy tread
in the ghostly light,in the ghostly light.
Brave Worraland went one grey nightfall
(A woi! woi!) where the grim rocks frown;
he came no more to the camps at all
(Skies dark, and the moon low down).

As we came up by the gully side
(Deep dusk, and the moon low down)
A Dingo whined and a Curlew cried
and the reeds replied as in hushed affright
where tall brae Worraland screamed and died
in the ghostly light, in the ghostly light.
For the Thing lurks there in the haunted place
(A woi! woi!) where the pool is brown,
where lost ones vanish and leave no trace
(Day dead, and the moon low down).

Of, go not by near the bunyip's lair
(Stars dim, and the moon low down)
or tip-toe past and beware, beware
the dark pool snare and be set for flight,
for things of terror have happened there
in the ghostly light, in the ghostly light
and in the gunyas we crouch and hark
(A woi! woi!) where the dead men drown
The monster's bellow across the dark
(Stars gone, and the moon low down).

James Martin Devaney

The Frog Pool

Week after week it shrank and shrank
as the fierce drought fiend drank and drank,
till on the bone-dry bed revealed
the mud peeled;
but now tonight is steamy-warm,
heavy with hint of thunderstorm.

And hark! hark! hoarse and harsh
the throaty croak of the frogs in the marsh:
"Wake! wake! awake! awake!
The drought break!"
but no, that chorus seems to me
more a primeval harmony.

The thunder booms, the floods flow
blended with deeper din below,
and every time the skies crash
the swamps flash!
and the whole place will be tonight
a pandemonium of delight.

James Martin Devaney

Winter Westerlies

Leaning against the wind across the paddock ways
comes Dan home with forward stoop like a man bent and old,
clashes the door in haste as one pursued: 'By Christ, it's cold!'
and crooks his fingers to the blaze.

We do not live these days, but each exhausting day
unnerved we numbly wait return of life, and must abide
the wind, the still beleaguering wind; all voices else outside
imperioulsy it has blown away.

Over the bronze-brown paddocks the grass is bowed flat down;
along the birdless creek a cold malevolence has passed;
a forlorn sparrow clings on the fence against the icy blast,
his soft breast feathers loosely blown.

We watch the saplings buffeted without repose,
their foliage all on one side, plunging without rest,
stems leaning all one way from the assailing west,
bending as backs cower from blows.

The hunched cattle no longer feeding dejected stand
with dumb endurance, tails to the flogging wind hour after hour;
from some far frozen hell of winds a blind and souless power
invades and harries all the land.

The Wind! The Wind! It fumbles at the fastened panes,
fills, and posseses all, a tyranny without control;
ceaseless, changeless, malign, searching into the very soul,
the rushing desolation reigns.

James Martin Devaney