

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Jessie Mackay**

**- poems -**

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## A Folk Song

I came to your town, my love,  
And you were away, away!  
I said "She is with the Queen's maidens:  
They tarry long at their play.  
They are stringing her words like pearls  
To throw to the dukes and earls."  
But O, the pity!  
I had but a morn of windy red  
To come to the town where you were bred,  
And you were away, away!

I came to your town, my love,  
And you were away, away!  
I said, "She is with the mountain elves  
And misty and fair as they.  
They are spinning a diamond net  
To cover her curls of jet."  
But O, the pity!  
I had but a noon of searing heat  
To come to your town, my love, my sweet,  
And you were away, away!

I came to your town, my love,  
And you were away, away!  
I said, "She is with the pale white saints,  
And they tarry long to pray.  
They give her a white lily-crown,  
And I fear she will never come down."  
But O, the pity!  
I had but an even grey and wan  
To come to your town and plead as man,  
And you were away, away!

Jessie Mackay

## Dunedin in the Gloaming

Like a black, enamoured King whispered low the thunder  
To the lights of Roslyn, terraced far asunder:  
Hovered low the sister cloud in wild, warm wonder.

"O my love, Dunedin town, the only, the abiding!  
Who can look undazzled up where the Norn is riding, --  
Watch the sword of destiny from the scabbard gliding!

"Dark and rich and ringing true -- word and look for ever;  
Taking to her woman heart all forlorn endeavour;  
Heaven's sea about her feet, not the bounded river!"

"Sister of the mountain mist, and never to be holden  
With the weary sophistries that dimmer eyes embolden, --  
O the dark Dunedin town, shot with green and golden!"

Then a silver pioneer netted in the rift,  
Leaning over Maori Hill, dreaming in the lift,  
Dropped her starry memories through the passioned drift: --

"Once -- I do remember them, the glory and the garden,  
Ere the elder stars had learnt God's mystery of pardon,  
Ere the youngest, I myself, had seen the flaming warden --

"Once even after even I stole ever shy and early  
To mirror me within a glade of Eden cool and pearly,  
Where shy and cold and holy ran a torrent sought but rarely.

"And fondly could I swear that this my glade had risen newly, --  
Burst the burning desert tomb wherein she lieth truly,  
To keep an Easter with the birds and me who loved her duly."

Wailing, laughing, loving, hoar, spake the lordly ocean:  
"You are sheen and steadfastness: I am sheen and motion,  
Gulfing argosies for whim, navies for a notion.

"Sleep you well, Dunedin Town, though loud the lulling lyre is;  
Lady of the stars terrene, where quick the human fire is,  
Lady of the Maori pines, the turrets, and the eyries!"

Jessie Mackay

## October in New Zealand

O JUNE has her diamonds, her diamonds of sheen,  
Meet for a queen's neck, if Death had e'er a queen!  
June has her blue days, jewels of delight,  
Set in the ivory of Alp-land white,—  
But October, October's the lady o' the year!

O January's garland is redder than the rose,  
And the wine-red ruby of January glows  
All the way to madness and half the way to sin,  
When sleep is in the poppy and fire is in the whin!  
But October, October's the lady o' the year!

October will ride in a mantle o' the vair,  
With the flower o' the quince in her dew-wet hair;  
October will ride to the gates of the day,  
With the bluebells ringing on her maiden way;—  
For October, October's the lady o' the year!

Jessie Mackay

## Ortygia

IN Ortygia the Dawn land the old gods dwell,  
And the silver's yet a-quiver on the old wizard well  
By the milk-white walls of the Temple of the Moon,  
Where the Dawn Maids hallow the red gods' tune,  
And old grey Time is a nine-year child,  
Back between the rivers ere man was ever 'guiled,  
Or the knelling 'Never, never!' by the cherubim was rung.  
It was there, there, there, in Ortygia the young,—  
It was there, there, there, in the meadows of the sky  
That first we went a-summering, my love of loves and I.  
And well I wot the pleasaunce for them that thither go  
Is litten with the beacons that the Dawn Maids know,  
With their vigil at end in the Temple of the Moon,  
And their prayer all prayer for the waked world's boon.  
The words they speak in that land are new as the dawn;  
The rills that run in that land are diamond, drawn  
From the old wizard well where the red gods croon.  
And walk you in Ortygia or late or soon,  
It is but lovers only that ever you will see;  
For every silver wood-king's a trysting tree,  
And the dream-flowers are keeping their first high May  
For the glad and the glamoured who walk yon way;  
And to the summit etherous the track you cannot miss,  
Though the hills are dim and sheeny with the rainbow's kiss.  
O, we walked the road of iris, my love of loves and I  
In Ortygia the young with the red gods by!

Jessie Mackay

## **Song of the Driftweed**

HERE'S to the home that was never, never ours!  
Toast it full and fairly when the winter lowers.  
Speak ye low, my merry men, sitting at your ease;  
Harken to the homeless Drift in the roaring seas!

Here's to the life we shall never live on earth!  
Cut for us awry, awry ages ere the birth.  
Set the teeth and meet it well, wind upon the shore;  
Like a lion, in the face look the Nevermore!

Here's to the love we were never let to win!  
What of that? a many shells have a pearl within;  
Some are mated with the gold in the light of day;  
Some are buried fathoms deep, in the seas away.

Here's to the selves we shall never, never be!  
We're the drift of the world and the tangle of the sea.  
It's far beyond the Pleiad, it's out beyond the sun  
Where the rootless shall be rooted when the wander-year is done!

Jessie Mackay

## The Burial of Sir John Mackenzie

(1901)

They played him home to the House of Stones  
All the way, all the way,  
To his grave in the sound of the winter sea:  
The sky was dour, the sky was gray.  
They played him home with the chieftain's dirge,  
Till the wail was wed to the rolling surge,  
They played him home with a sorrowful will  
To his grave at the foot of the Holy Hill  
And the pipes went mourning all the way.

Strong hands that had struck for right  
All the day, all the day,  
Folded now in the dark of earth,  
Veiled dawn of the upper way!  
Strong hands that struck with his  
From days that were to the day that is  
Carry him now from the house of woe  
To ride the way the Chief must go:  
And his peers went mourning all the way.

Son and brother at his right hand  
All the way, all the way!  
And O for them and O for her  
Who stayed within, the dowie day!  
Son and brother and near of kin  
Go out with the chief who never comes in!  
And of all who loved him far and near  
'Twas the nearest most who held him dear --  
And his kin went mourning all the way!

The clan went on with the pipes before  
All the way, all the way;  
A wider clan than ever he knew  
Followed him home that dowie day.  
And who were they of the wider clan?  
The landless man and the no man's man,  
The man that lacked and the man unlearned,  
The man that lived but as he earned --  
And the clan went mourning all the way.

The heart of New Zealand went beside  
All the way, all the way,  
To the resting-place of her Highland Chief;  
Much she thought she could not say;  
He found her a land of many domains,  
Maiden forest and fallow plains --  
He left her a land of many homes,  
The pearl of the world where the sea wind roams,  
And New Zealand went mourning all the way.

Jessie Mackay

## **The Grey Company**

O the grey, grey company  
Of the pallid dawn!  
O the ghostly faces,  
Ashen-like and drawn!  
The Lord's lone sentinels  
Dotted down the years,  
The little grey company  
Before the pioneers.

Dreaming of Utopias  
Ere the time was ripe,  
They awoke to scorning,  
The jeering and the strife.  
Dreaming of millenniums  
In a world of wars,  
They awoke to shudder  
At a flaming Mars.

Never was a Luther  
But a Huss was first --  
A fountain unregarded  
In the primal thirst.  
Never was a Newton  
Crowned and honoured well,  
But first, alone, Galileo  
Wasted in a cell.

In each other's faces  
Looked the pioneers;  
Drank the wine of courage  
All their battle years.  
For their weary sowing  
Through the world wide,  
Green they saw the harvest  
Ere the day they died.

But the grey, grey company  
Stood every man alone  
In the chilly dawnlight,  
Scarcely had they known  
Ere the day they perished,  
That their beacon-star  
Was not glint of marsh-light  
In the shadows far.

The brave white witnesses  
To the truth within  
Took the dart of folly,  
Took the jeer of sin;  
Crying "Follow, follow,  
Back to Eden gate!"  
They trod the Polar desert,

Met a desert fate.

Be laurel to the victor,  
And roses to the fair,  
And asphodel Elysian  
Let the hero wear;  
But lay the maiden lilies  
Upon their narrow biers --  
The lone grey company  
Before the pioneers.

Jessie Mackay