

Classic Poetry Series

Jessie Mackay

- 8 poems -

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Jessie Mackay (1864-1938)

Jessie Mackay was a New Zealand poet. Her parents were Scottish. She went to Christchurch to train as a teacher, and taught at small rural schools until 1898. She moved to Dunedin, and worked as a journalist for the Otago Witness. In 1902, she moved to Christchurch where she lived with her sister Georgina. In 1906, she was lady editor of the Canterbury Times.

Her papers are held by the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand. The Jessie Mackay Memorial Award for Verse is given by the PEN New Zealand.

Works:

The Spirit of the Rangatira and other ballads.. Melbourne: George Robertson. 1889.

The Sitter on the Rail and other poems. Christchurch: Simpson and Williams, 1891.

From the Maori Sea. Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1908.

Land of the Morning. Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1909.

The Bride of the Rivers and other verses. Christchurch: Simpson and Williams, 1926.

Vigil. Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1935

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

Rona in the Moon

Rona, Rona, sister olden,-
Rona in the moon!
You'll never break your prison golden,-
Never, late or soon!

Rona, for her crying daughter,
At the dead of night
Took the gourd and went for water;
Went without a light.

There she heard the owlets wrangle
With an angry hoot;
Stick and stone and thorny tangle
Wounded Rona's foot.

'Boil the moon!' she said in passion;
'Boil your lazy head!
Hiding thus in idle fashion
In your starry bed!'

Angry was the moon in heaven;
Down to earth she came:-
'Stay you ever unforgiven
For the word of shame!

Up!- you made the moon a byword -
Up and dwell with me!
Rona felt the drawing skyward,-
Seized a ngaio tree.

But from earth the ngaio parted
Like a bitten thread;
Like a comet upward darted
Rona overhead.

In the moon is Rona sitting
Never to be free;
With the gourd she held in flitting
And the ngaio tree.

You'll never break your prison golden,-
Never, late or soon,
Rona, Rona, sister olden, -
Rona in the moon!

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