

Classic Poetry Series

John O'Brien

- 11 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

John O'Brien (13 October 1878 - 27 December 1952)

Monsignor Patrick Joseph Hartigan was an Australian Roman Catholic priest, educator, author and poet.

Biography

He was born at Yass, New South Wales and ordained after study at St Patrick's Seminary, Manly. Writing under the pseudonym "John O'Brien" Hartigan's verse celebrated the lives and mores of the outback pastoral folk he ministered as a peripatetic curate to the southern New South Wales and Riverina towns of Thurgoona, Berrigan and Narrandera, in the first two decades of the 20th century. His poetry was very popular in Australia and was well received in Ireland and the United States.

The refrain We'll all be rooned from his poem Said Hanrahan has entered colloquial Australian English as a jocular response to any prediction of dire consequences arising, particularly, from events outside the interlocutor's control.

Hartigan died in Lewisham, an inner suburb of Sydney in 1952.

Legacy

A John O'Brien Festival is held annually in Narrandera.

Works:

Around the Boree Log and Other Verses 1921
The Parish of St Mel's 1954

Around the Boree Log

Oh, stick me in the old caboose this night of wind and rain,
And let the doves of fancy loose to bill and coo again.
I want to feel the pulse of love that warmed the blood like wine;
I want to see the smile above this kind old land of mine.

So come you by your parted ways that wind the wide world through,
And make a ring around the blaze the way we used to do;
The "fountain" on the sooted crane will sing the old, old song
Of common joys in homely vein forgotten, ah, too long.

The years have turned the rusted key, and time is on the jog,
Yet spend another night with me around the boree* log.

Now someone driving through the rain will happen in, I bet;
So fill the fountain up again, and leave the table set.
For this was ours with pride to say--and all the world defy--
No stranger ever turned away, no neighbour passed us by.

Bedad, he'll have to stay the night; the rain is going to pour--
So make the rattling windows tight, and close the kitchen door,
And bring the old lopsided chair, the tattered cushion, too--
We'll make the stranger happy there, the way we used to do.

The years have turned the rusted key, and time is on the jog,
Yet spend another night with me around the boree log.

He'll fill his pipe, and good and well, and all aglow within
We'll hear the news he has to tell, the yarns he has to spin;
Yarns--yes, and super-yarns, forsooth, to set the eyes agog,
And freeze the blood of trusting youth around the boree log.

Then stir it up and make it burn; the poker's next to you;
Come, let us poke it all in turn, the way we used to do.
There's many a memory bright and fair will tingle at a name--
But leave unstirred the embers there we cannot fan to flame.

For years have turned the rusted key, and time is on the jog ;
Still, spend this fleeting night with me around the boree log.

John O'Brien

Could I hear the Kookaburras once again

May a fading fancy hover round a gladness that is over?
May a dreamer in the silence rake the ashes of the past?
So a spirit might awaken in the best the years have taken,
And the Jove that left him lonely might be with him at the last.
While he searches in the by-ways, shall his heart forget the highways
Where the sunburnt arms are toiling in the sun-shine and the rain,
Where the simple things and lowly make their lives sublime and holy,
And the kookaburras chorus once again?

There's a little house a-peeping o'er the swaying and the sweeping
Of the wheat that nods and ripples as the breezes skim its top;
And the days of pioneering in the ringing and the clearing
See the first-born of their labours in the house behind the crop.
There the fallow land is showing where the box and pine were growing,
And a sweet hope gilds the future with the colour of the grain;
Gentle visions softly tripping in the ploughing and the stripping,
While the kookaburras chorus once again.

Let a, dying fancy hover round the glories that are over;
Lift a song to sing the present – to the hopeless hope impart –
For above the past's bewailing, golden-writ but unavailing,
Is the simple little ditty that can cheer a drooping heart.
Lift it high for all to hear it. In the Helper's love endear it,
And my ageing heart shall hasten to applaud the sweet refrain;
Yes, I'd feel the pulses stirring to the splendid truth recurring,
Could I hear the kookaburras once again.

Could I hear them as I heard them when the joy of living spurred them,
When the world was clean and wholesome and they laughed the gloom away,
All the fatal fiction scorning that the canvas of the morning
Is but splashed with faded colours from the brush of yesterday.
Oh, I'd bless them and I'd cheer them, could I wander off and hear them
Boom the head-lights of the coming day that sweep the hills amain,
For I'd know the tocsin sounding of a fuller hope abounding,
Could I hear them hail the dawning once again.

To no age in all the story of the bearded years and hoary
Would I yield the future's promise in the mould of progress cast;
Still, a fading fancy lingers, while the touch of gentle angers
Moves aside the sombre curtain that was drawn across the past.
Come the fairy visions winging, come the laughter and the singing,
But the shadows fall around me and the echo dies in pain;
Yet I'd feel the wings that bore me when the world was all before me,
Could I hear the kookaburras once again.

John O'Brien

Said Hanrahan

"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan
In accents most forlorn
Outside the church ere Mass began
One frosty Sunday morn.

The congregation stood about,
Coat-collars to the ears,
And talked of stock and crops and drought
As it had done for years.

"It's lookin' crook," said Daniel Croke;
"Bedad, it's cruke, me lad
For never since the banks went broke
Has seasons been so bad.

"It's dry, all right," said young O'Neil,
With which astute remark
He squatted down upon his heel
And chewed a piece of bark.

And so around the chorus ran
"It's keepin' dry, no doubt."
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out.

"The crops are done; ye'll have your work
To save one bag of grain;
From here way out to Back-O'-Bourke
They're singin' out for rain.

"They're singin' out for rain," he said,
"And all the tanks are dry."
The congregation scratched its head,
And gazed around the sky.

"There won't be grass, in any case,
Enough to feed an ass;
There's not a blade on Casey's place
As I came down to Mass."

"If rain don't come this month," said Dan,
And cleared his throat to speak -
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan, "
If rain don't come this week."

A heavy silence seemed to steal
On all at this remark;
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed a piece of bark.

"We want an inch of rain, we do,"
O'Neil observed at last;

But Croke "maintained" we wanted two
To put the danger past.

"If we don't get three inches, man,
Or four to break this drought,
We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out."

In God's good time down came the rain;
And all the afternoon
On iron roof and window-pane
It drummed a homely tune.

And through the night it pattered still,
And lightsome, gladsome elves
On dripping spout and window-sill
Kept talking to themselves.

It pelted, pelted all day long,
A-singing at its work,
Till every heart took up the song
Way out to Back-O'-Bourke.

And every creek a banker ran,
And dams filled overtop;
"We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"If this rain doesn't stop."

And stop it did, in God's good time:
And spring came in to fold
A mantle o'er the hills sublime
Of green and pink and gold.

And days went by on dancing feet,
With harvest-hopes immense,
And laughing eyes beheld the wheat
Nid-nodding o'er the fence.

And, oh, the smiles on every face,
As happy lad and lass
Through grass knee-deep on Casey's place
Went riding down to Mass.

While round the church in clothes genteel
Discoursed the men of mark,
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed his piece of bark.

"There'll be bush-fires for sure, me man,
There will, without a doubt;
We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan,
"Before the year is out."

John O'Brien

Six Brown Boxer Hats

The hawker with his tilted cart pulled up beside the fence,
And opened out his wondrous mart with startling eloquence;
All sorts of toys for girls and boys upon the grass he spread,
And dolls, dirt-cheap, that went to sleep when stood upon their head;
But our male hearts were beating high for balls and cricket-bats
When mother, with the business eye, bought six brown boxer hats.

Six out-of-date extinguishers that fitted us too soon--
Six ugly, upturned canisters--but through the afternoon
Our rage and scorn were overborne to see swift fingers flit
With pad and trim, around the rim, to make the stove-pipes fit.
So Monday morning came, and six "ungrateful young kanats"
Went off to school like lunatics in six brown boxer hats.

Then friends at every meeting showed an interest all too rare
Or chilled our faltered greetings with the silence of a stare;
And comrades who, we thought, were true indulged in vulgar jeers,
While willing fists of humorists slambanged them round our ears;
But worst of all the social smart from taunting plutocrats--
"Yez pinched them from the hawker's cart, them six brown boxer hats."

(Dress how we will, we feel it still, when friends will stop to chat,
To see a broad good-humoured smile is trained upon the hat.)
We could not fight with wonted might, for bitter black distress
Was in our souls, and on our polls the hateful ugliness.
We faced a fine barrage of sticks; and six "broke-up" kanats
Went home to meet the storm in six brown battered boxer hats.

John O'Brien

John O'Brien

Tangmalangmaloo

The bishop sat in lordly state and purple cap sublime,
And galvanized the old bush church at Confirmation time;
And all the kids were mustered up from fifty miles around,
With Sunday clothes, and staring eyes, and ignorance profound.
Now was it fate, or was it grace, whereby they yarded too
An overgrown two-storey lad from Tangmalangmaloo?

A hefty son of virgin soil, where nature has had her fling,
And grows the trefoil three feet high and mats it in the spring;
Where mighty hills uplift their heads to pierce the welkin's rim,
And trees sprout up a hundred feet before they shoot a limb;
There everything is big and grand, and men are giants too -
But Christian Knowledge wilts, alas, at Tangmalangmaloo.

The bishop summed the youngsters up, as bishops only can;
He cast a searching glance around, then fixed upon his man.
But glum and dumb and undismayed through every bout he sat;
He seemed to think that he was there, but wasn't sure of that.
The bishop gave a scornful look, as bishops sometimes do,
And glared right through the pagan in from Tangmalangmaloo.

'Come, tell me, boy,' his lordship said, in crushing tones severe,
'Come, tell me why is Christmas Day the greatest of the year?
'How is it that around the world we celebrate that day
'And send a name upon a card to those who're far away?
'Why is it wandering ones return with smiles and greetings, too?
A squall of knowledge hit the lad from Tangmalangmaloo.

He gave a lurch which set a-shake the vases on the shelf,
He knocked the benches all askew, up-ending of himself.
And oh, how pleased his lordship was, and how he smiled to say,
'That's good, my boy. Come, tell me now; and what is Christmas Day?
The ready answer bared a fact no bishop ever knew -
'It's the day before the races out at Tangmalangmaloo.

John O'Brien

The Altar Boy

Now McEvoy was altar-boy
As long as I remember;
He was, bedad, a crabbed lad,
And sixty come December.
Faith, no one dared to "interfare"
In things the which concernin'
'Twas right and just to him to trust
Who had the bit o' learnin'
To serve the priest; and here at least
He never proved defaulter;
So, wet or dry, you could rely
To find him on the Altar.

The acolyte in surplice white
Some admiration rouses:
But McEvoy was altar-boy
In "Sund'y coat-'n-trouses."
And out he'd steer, the eye severe
The depths behind him plumbin',
In dread, I wot (he once was "cot"),
The priest might not be comin':
Then, stepping slow on heel and toe,
No more he'd fail or falter,
But set likewise with hands and eyes
He'd move about the Altar.

A master-stroke of other folk
Might start the opposition,
And some, mebbe, in jealousy
Bedoubt their erudition;
But McEvoy was altar-boy
And, spite of all their chattin',
It "put the stuns" on lesser ones
To hear him run the Latin.
And faith, he knew the business through,
The rubrics and the psalter;
You never met his "aikals" yet
When servin' on the Altar.

The priest, indeed, might take the lead
By fight of Holy Orders,
But McEvoy was altar-boy,
And just upon the borders.
So sermons dry he'd signify
With puckered brows behoovin',
An', if you please, at homilies
He'd nod the head approvin';
And all the while a cute old smile
Picked out the chief defaulter;
Faith, wet or dry, the crabbed eye
Would "vet" you from the Altar.

John O'Brien

John O'Brien

The Kookaburras

Fall the shadows on the gullies, fades the purple from the mountain;
And the day that's passing outwards down the stairways of the sky,
With its kindly deeds and sordid on its folded page recorded,
Waves a friendly hand across the range to bid the world "good-bye."
Comes a buoyant peal of laughter from the tall, white, slender timber,
Rugged mirth that floods the bushland with the joy of brotherhood,
With the rustic notes sonorous of a happy laughing chorus,
When the kookaburras bless the world because the world is good.

Oh, 'tis good and clean and wholesome when we take the sheep-track
homewards,
And the kindly kitchen chimney flaps its homely bannerets;
All our twigs of effort, shooting golden promise for the fruiting,
Bring a night in peace enfolded that a useful day begets.
Hopeful dreams, their visions weaving, steel our hearts against to-
morrow,
And we dare the challenge, strengthened by today's assaults withstood;
Beam the pregnant days before us; and another laughing chorus
Wraps the world in rippling revelry, because the world is good.

Loving eyes to watch our coming, loving arms to twine around us--
Tender tendrils, soft and silken, firmer far than iron stay--
All our little world upholding, gentle hearts and home enfolding,
And a cheery, friendly neighbour dropping in upon his way:
Mellow joy the soul refreshes with the scented breath of heaven,
With the whispered songs of other spheres, hereafter understood:
Angels keep their sure watch o'er us: and another laughing chorus
Flings a vesper blessing round the world, because the world is good.

J. O'Brien

John O'Brien

The Little Irish Mother

THE LITTLE IRISH MOTHER

Have you seen the tidy cottage in the straggling, dusty street,
Where the roses swing their censers by the door?
Have you heard the happy prattle and the tramp of tiny feet
As the sturdy youngsters romp around the floor?
Did you wonder why the wiree* comes to sing his sweetest song ?
Did the subtle charm of home upon you fall?
Did you puzzle why it haunted you the while you passed along?--
There's a Little Irish Mother there; that's all.

When you watched the children toiling at their lessons in the school,
Did you pick a winsome girleen from the rest,
With her wealth of curl a-cluster as she smiled upon the stool,
In a simple Monday-morning neatness dressed?
Did you mark the manly bearing of a healthy-hearted boy
As he stood erect his well-conned task to tell ?
Did you revel in the freshness with a pulse of wholesome joy?--
There's a Little Irish Mother there as well.

There's a Little Irish Mother that a lonely vigil keeps
In the settler's hut where seldom stranger comes,
Watching by the home-made cradle where one more Australian sleeps
While the breezes whisper weird things to the gums,
Where the settlers battle gamely, beaten down to rise again,
And the brave bush wives the toil and silence share,
Where the nation is a-building in the hearts of splendid men--
There's a Little Irish Mother always there.

There's a Little Irish Mother--and her head is bowed and gray,
And she's lonesome when the evening shadows fall;
Near the fire she "do be thinkin'," all the "childer" are away,
And their silent pictures watch her from the wall.
For the world has claimed them from her; they are men and women
now,
In their thinning hair the tell-tale silver gleams;
But she runs her fingers, dozing, o'er a tousled baby brow--
It is "little Con" or "Bridgie" in her dreams.

There's a Little Irish Mother sleeping softly now at last
Where the tangled grass is creeping all around;
And the shades of unsung heroes troop about her from the past
While the moonlight scatters diamonds on the mound.
And a good Australian's toiling in the world of busy men
Where the strife and sordid grinding cramp and kill;
But his eyes are sometimes misted, and his heart grows brave again--
She's the Little Irish Mother to him still.

When at last the books are balanced in the settling-up to be,
And our idols on the rubbish-heap are hurled,
Then the Judge shall call to honour--not the "stars," it seems to me,
Who have posed behind the footlights of the world;

But the king shall doff his purple, and the queen lay by her crown,
And the great ones of the earth shall stand aside
While a Little Irish Mother in her tattered, faded gown
Shall receive the crown too long to her denied.

John O'Brien

John O'Brien

The Meeting

They hadn't met for fifty years, or was it fifty-one ?
They'd parted when their ship arrived their separate ways to run.
The old Baptismal Register back home in County Clare
Held both their names in faded ink, the same day written there.
Together in the parish school they conned the ABC,
Together, too, they went along to join the seminary.
Together in their long white albs with new-anointed hands
They took the yoke and sailed away to work in foreign lands;
Nor did they meet again till now, when, each upon his stick,
Two bony hands are gripped, and Father Pat meets Father Mick.
The spring and summer days have gone, the winter's nearly through,
Says Father Pat to Father Mick, "And here's long life to you."
Says Father Pat, "'Tis fifty years; and how the time has gone."
Says Father Mick, "I think you'll find it's nearer fifty-wan."

"And how's the world been treating you these many summers past?
You don't look one day older, man, than when I saw you last."
"That all depends," said Father Pat, "upon the point of view,
But thanks for them kind words, Mickeen, and here's respects to you.
And how is this and how is that? Now tell me have you heard
From those who took the step with us. I haven't had a word
At all at all, since we came out, from Mat or Tim or Con
These fifty years." Said Father Mick, "'Twill soon be fifty-wan."

But whether it was fifty-one or just the fifty neat
The time went by as time will do when after years we meet:
A kindly fairy flitted in to touch the past with gold,
And two old fogies gazing back forgot that they were old.
The Irish larks were in the skies, the Irish hills were green,
There came the smell of new-mown hay along the old boreen:
Old friends were met, old tales retold again and yet again--
"Ho, ho, begob," said Father Mick, "it was a grand world then."

And when at last the parting came and twitching fingers met,
It might have been the wintry breeze, but four old eyes were wet.
Said Father Pat to Father Mick, "A mighty treat it's been;
Now, can't we meet again, and soon? We're getting on, Mickeen--
The years are passing overhead, and passing dreadful quick;
Don't wait another fifty." "Fifty-wan," said Father Mick.

John O'Brien

John O'Brien

The Old Bush School

'Tis a queer, old battered landmark that belongs to other years;
With the dog-leg fence around it, and its hat about its ears,
And the cow-bell in the gum-tree, and the bucket on the stool,
There's a motley host of memories round that old bush school--

With its seedy desks and benches, where at least I left a name
Carved in agricultural letters--'twas my only bid for fame;
And the spider-haunted ceilings, and the rafters, firmly set,
Lined with darts of nibs and paper (doubtless sticking in them yet),
And the greasy slates and blackboards, where I oft was proved a fool
And a blur upon the scutcheon of the old bush school.

There I see the boots in order--" 'lastic-sides" we used to wear--
With a pair of "everlastin's" cracked and dusty here and there;
And we marched with great "high action"--hands behind and eyes
before--
While we murdered "Swanee River" as we tramped around the floor.

Still the scholars pass before me with their freckled features grave,
And a nickname fitting better than the name their mothers gave;
Tousled hair and vacant faces, and their garments every one
Shabby heirlooms in the family, handed down from sire to son.
Ay, and mine were patched in places, and half-masted, as a rule--
They were fashionable trousers at the old bush school.

There I trudged it from the Three-mile, like a patient, toiling brute,
With a stocking round my ankle, and my heart within my boot,
Morgan, Nell and Michael Joseph, Jim and Mary, Kate and Mart
Tramping down the sheep-track with me, little rebels at the heart;

Shivery grasses round about us nodding bonnets in the breeze,
Happy Jacks and Twelve Apostles* hurdle-racing up the trees,
Peewees calling from the gullies, living wonders in the pool--
Hard bare seats and drab gray humdrum at the old bush school.

Early rising in the half-light, when the morn came, bleak and chill;
For the little mother roused us ere the sun had topped the hill,
"Up, you children, late 'tis gettin'." Shook the house beneath her knock,
And she wasn't always truthful, and she tampered with the clock.

Keen she was about "the learnin'," and she told us o'er and o'er
Of our luck to have "the schoolin'" right against our very door.
And the lectures--Oh, those lectures to our stony hearts addressed!
"Don't be mixin' with the Regans and the Ryans and the rest"--

"Don't be pickin' up with Carey's little talkative kanats*"--
Well, she had us almost thinking we were born aristocrats.
But we found our level early--in disaster, as a rule~
For they knocked "the notions" sideways at the old bush school.

Down the road came Laughing Mary, and the beast that she bestrode
Was Maloney's sorry piebald she had found beside the road;

Straight we scrambled up behind her, and as many as could fit
Clung like circus riders bare-back without bridle-rein or bit,
On that corrugated backbone in a merry row we sat~
We propelled him with our school-bags; Mary steered him with her
hat~
And we rolled the road behind us like a ribbon from the spool,
"Making butter," so we called it, to the old bush school.

What a girl was Mary Casey in the days of long ago!
She was queen among the scholars, or at least we thought her so;
She was first in every mischief and, when overwhelmed by fate,
She could make delightful drawings of the teacher on her slate.
There was rhythm in every movement, as she gaily passed along
With a rippling laugh that lilted like the music of a song;
So we called her "Laughing Mary," and a fitful fancy blessed
E'en the bashful little daisies that her dainty feet caressed.

She had cheeks like native roses in the fullness of their bloom,
And she used to sing the sweetest as we marched around the room;
In her eyes there lurked the magic, maiden freshness of the morn,
In her hair the haunting colour I had seen upon the corn;
Round her danced the happy sunshine when she smiled upon the stool--
And I used to swap her dinners at the old bush school.

Hard the cobbled road of knowledge to the feet of him who plods
After fragile fragments fallen from the workshop of the gods;
Long the quest, and ever thieving pass the pedlars o'er the hill
With the treasures in their bundles, but to leave us questing still.
Mystic fires horizons redden, but each crimson flash in turn
Only lights the empty places in the bracken and the fern;
So in after years I've proved it, spite of pedant, crank, and fool,
Very much the way I found it at the old bush school.

John O'Brien

John O'Brien

The Presbyt'ry Dog

Now of all the old sinners in mischief immersed,
From the ages of Gog and Magog,
At the top of the list, from the last to the first,
And by every good soul in the parish accursed,
Is that scamp of a Presbyt'ry Dog.

He's a hairy old scoundrel as ugly as sin,
He's a demon that travels incog.,
With a classical name, and an ignorant grin,
And a tail, by the way, that is scraggy and thin,
And the rest of him merely a dog.

He is like a young waster of fortune possessed,
As he rambles the town at a jog;
For he treats the whole world as a sort of a jest,
While the comp'ny he keeps--well, it must be confessed
It's unfit for a Presbyt'ry Dog.

He is out on the street at the sound of a fight,
With the eyes on him standing agog,-
And the scut of a tail--well, bedad, it's a fright;
Faith, you'd give him a kick that would set him alight,
But you can't with the Presbyt'ry Dog.

His rotundity now to absurdity runs,
Like a blackfellow gone to the grog;
For the knowing old shaver the presbyt'ry shuns
When it's time for a meal, and goes off to the nuns,
Who're deceived in the Presbyt'ry Dog.

When he follows the priest to the bush, there is war.
He inspects the whole place at a jog,
And he puts on great airs and fine antics galore,
While he chases the sheep till we're after his gore,
Though he may be the Presbyt'ry Dog.

'Twas last Sunday a dog in the church went ahead
With an ill-bred and loud monologue,
And the priest said some things that would shiver the dead,
And I'm with him in every last word that he said -
Ah, But wait - 'twas the Presbyt'ry Dog.

John O'Brien

John O'Brien

Tumba Bloody Rumba

I was down the Riverina, knockin' 'round the towns a bit,
And occasionally resting with a schooner in me mitt,
And on one of these occasions, when the bar was pretty full
And the local blokes were arguin' assorted kind of bull,
I heard a conversation, most peculiar in its way.
It's only in Australia you would hear a joker say:

"Howya bloody been, ya drongo, haven't seen ya fer a week,
And yer mate was lookin' for ya when ya come in from the creek.
'E was lookin' up at Ryan's, and around at bloody Joe's,
And even at the Royal, where 'e bloody NEVER goes".

And the other bloke says "Seen 'im? Owed 'im half a bloody quid.
Forgot to give it back to him, but now I bloody did -
Could've used the thing me bloody self. Been off the bloody booze,
Up at Tumba-bloody-rumba shootin' kanga-bloody-roos."

Now the bar was pretty quiet, and everybody heard
The peculiar integration of this adjectival word,
But no-one there was laughing, and me - I wasn't game,
So I just sits back and lets them think I spoke the bloody same.

Then someone else was interested to know just what he got,
How many kanga-bloody-roos he went and bloody shot,
And the shooting bloke says "Things are crook -
the drought's too bloody tough.
I got forty-two by seven, and that's good e-bloody-nough."

And, as this polite rejoinder seemed to satisfy the mob,
Everyone stopped listening and got on with the job,
Which was drinkin' beer, and arguin', and talkin' of the heat,
Of boggin' in the bitumen in the middle of the street,
But as for me, I'm here to say the interesting piece of news
Was Tumba-bloody-rumba shootin' kanga bloody-roos.

John O'Brien (aka Nino Culotta)

John O'Brien