

Classic Poetry Series

John Shaw Neilson

- 25 poems -

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John Shaw Neilson (22 February 1872 – 12 May 1942)

John Shaw Neilson, was an Australian poet. Slightly built, for most of his life, John Shaw Neilson worked as a labourer, fruit-picking, clearing scrub, navvying and working in quarries, and, after 1928, working as a messenger with the Country Roads Board in Melbourne. Largely untrained and only basically educated, Neilson became known as one of Australia's finest lyric poets, who wrote a great deal about the natural world, and the beauty in it.

Early life

Neilson was born in Penola, South Australia of purely Scottish ancestry. His grandparents were John Neilson and Jessie MacFarlane of Cupar, Neil Mackinnon of Skye, and Margaret Stuart of Greenock. His mother, Margaret MacKinnon, was born at Dartmoor, Victoria, his father, John Neilson, at Stranraer, Scotland, in 1844.

John Neilson senior was brought to South Australia at nine years of age, had practically no education and was a shepherd, shearer, and small farmer all his life. He never had enough money to get good land, and like other pioneers he fought drought and rabbits and other pests, receiving little reward for his labours. He died in 1922 having lived just long enough to see his son accepted as an Australian poet. He himself had written verses; one song, *Waiting for the Rain*, was popular in the shearing sheds, and in January 1893 he wrote the senior prize poem, *The Pioneers*, for the literary competition held by the Australian Natives Association. In 1938 a small collection of his poems, *The Men of the Fifties*, was published by the Hawthorn Press at Melbourne.

John Shaw Neilson had little more education than his father. When about eight years old he was for 15 months at the state school at Penola, but he had to leave in 1881 when the family removed to Minimay in the south-west Wimmera in Victoria. There was no school at Minimay then, but four years later one was opened and Neilson attended for another 15 months. There was, however, a Bible and a tattered copy of Burns's poems in the house, and when at the age of 15 a copy of Hood's poems came in his way, Neilson read them all with great joy. Driven out by drought, Neilson's father took his family to Nhill in 1889, and was employed as a farm worker and on the roads. His son soon after began to write verses of which some appeared in the local press and one in *The Australasian* in Melbourne.

Poetry

In January 1893 John Shaw Neilson won the junior prize for a poem at the Australian Natives Association's competition, in the same year that his father

won the senior prize with a better poem. In 1895 he went with his father to Sea Lake, and about a year later had some verses accepted by The Bulletin in Sydney. But his health broke down and he did little writing for about four years.

He was contributing to the Bulletin between 1901 and 1906, and about 1908 some of his verses, mostly of a light or popular kind, were accepted by Randolph Bedford for the Clarion. From about 1906 Neilson's sight began to fail, for the rest of his life he was able to do little reading, and most of his work was dictated.

When the Bookfellow was revived in 1911 Neilson was a contributor, and Alfred George Stephens the editor, began collecting the best of his poems, intending to issue them in a volume under the title of Green Days and Cherries; Fred John's Annual for 1913 included Neilson as the author of this volume. It was, however, delayed; the war delayed it further; and it was not issued until 1919, when the title Heart of Spring was adopted. It had a too laudatory preface by Stephens which stated that some of the work was "unsurpassed in the range of English lyrics". In spite of this it was well received, and in 1923, with the help of Mrs Louise Dyer, another volume, Ballad and Lyrical Poems, was published. This included nearly all the work in the first volume with some 20 additional lyrics.

About this time Neilson visited Melbourne and met many of the literary people of the period. Now in his 50s and not a robust man he was beginning to feel the strain of physical work.

"I don't mind some kinds of pick and shovel work," he said to Percival Serle, "but when I have to throw heavy stuff over my shoulder it gives me rather a wrench." He may have been referring to the time he spent in the Heyfield area, where he wrote several poems and helped in the construction of the Lake Glenmaggie weir wall.

In 1925 and again in 1926, Alfred Stephens suggested in newspaper articles that more suitable employment should be found for him. The difficulty was that Neilson's poor eyesight unfitted him for most kinds of work. However, a movement began in Melbourne to help him and he was granted a small literary pension; and eventually in 1928 a position was found for him as an attendant in the office of the Victorian Country Roads Board. This office was in the Exhibition Gardens, Melbourne, and in these pleasant surroundings Neilson spent his days until near the end of his life.

A volume, New Poems, was published in 1927, and in 1934 his Collected Poems appeared. Four years later another small volume was published, Beauty Imposes. A number of John Shaw Neilson's poems were set to music by composers such as Margaret Sutherland, Alfred Hill, Cathie O'Sullivan and Darryl Emmerson. The play, The Pathfinder, based on the life and writings of Neilson, enjoyed much success in the 1980s, toured twice, was produced for radio by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and published by Currency Press, Sydney, in 1987.

Death

Neilson retired from the Country Roads Board early in 1941, and went to Queensland to stay with friends. His literary pension was now increased to £2 a week. Soon after his return to Melbourne his health began to fail, and he died at a private hospital on 12 May 1942. He was buried in the Footscray Cemetery near Melbourne.

Personal life

John Shaw Neilson never married. He was a slender man of medium height with a face that suggested his kindness, refinement and innate beauty of character. He was glad to have his work appreciated, but it never affected his simplicity and modesty. He was slow in developing, perhaps as Stephens said, he had to learn the words with which to express himself. There is little suggestion of an intellectual background to his work, but the range of his

emotions is beautifully expressed with apparently unconscious artistry, in phrases that often have the touch of magic that marks the true poet.

Works:

Old Granny Sullivan, (poems), Sydney, Bookfellow, 1915.
Heart of Spring, (poems), Sydney, Bookfellow, 1919.
Ballad and Lyrical Poems, Sydney, Bookfellow, 1923.
New Poems, Sydney, Bookfellow, 1927.
Collected Poems of John Shaw Neilson, edited and with introduction by R. H. Croll, Melbourne, Lothian, 1934.
Beauty Imposes: Some Recent Verse, Angus and Robertson, 1938.
Unpublished Poems, edited by James Devaney, Angus and Robertson, 1947.
Shaw Neilson: poetry selections, selected and introduced by Judith Wright, Angus and Robertson, 1963.
The Poems of Shaw Neilson, edited and introduction by A. R. Chisholm, Angus and Robertson, 1965, revised edition, 1973.
Witnesses of Spring, edited by Judith Wright and Val Vallis, Angus and Robertson, 1970.
Selected Poems, edited by A. R. Chisholm, Angus and Robertson, 1976.
Green Days and Cherries: The Early Verse of Shaw Neilson, edited by Hugh Anderson and Leslie James Blake, Red Rooster Press, 1981.
Some Poems of John Shaw Neilson: Selected and With Wood-Engravings, Canberra, Brindabella Press, 1984.
John Shaw Neilson: Poetry, Autobiography, and Correspondence, edited by Cliff Hanna, University of Queensland Press, 1991.
Selected Poems, edited by Robert Gray, Angus and Robertson, 1991.
The Sun Is Up: Selected Poems, Loch Haven Books, 1991.

Biographies

Shaw Neilson 1944, by James Devaney
Shaw Neilson 1968, by H.J. Oliver
John Shaw Neilson 1972, by Hugh Anderson and L.J. Blake
The Autobiography of John Shaw Neilson 1978
The Pathfinder 1987, by Darryl Emmerson
Poet of the Colours 1988, by John H. Phillips
The Folly of Spring 1990, by Cliff Hanna
John Shaw Neilson: Poetry, Autobiography and Correspondence 1991, edited by Cliff Hanna
John Shaw Neilson: A Life in Letters 2001, Helen Hewson

A Protest and a Protest

A certain old maid at Port Victor
had many strange pets to afflict her,
her Kangaroos fought
with the emu's she caught
and when she protested, they kicked her

John Shaw Neilson

Beauty Imposes

Beauty imposes reverence in the Spring,
Grave as the urge within the honeybuds,
It wounds us as we sing.

Beauty is joy that stays not overlong.
Clad in the magic of sincerities,
It rides up in a song.

Beauty imposes chastenings on the heart,
Grave as the birds in last solemnities
Assembling to depart.

John Shaw Neilson

In the Dim Counties

In the dim counties
we take the long calm
Lilting no haziness,
sequel or psalm.

The little street wenches,
The holy and clean,
Live as good neighbours live
under the green.

Malice of sunbeam or
menace of moon
Piping shall leave us
no taste of a tune.

In the dim counties
the eyelids are dumb,
To the lean citizens
Love cannot come.

Love in the yellowing,
Love at the turn,
Love o' the cooing lip—
how should he burn?

The little street wenches,
the callous, unclean
—Could they but tell us what
all the gods mean.

Love cannot sabre us,
blood cannot flow,
In the dim counties
that wait us below.

John Shaw Neilson

Love's Coming

QUIETLY as rosebuds
Talk to thin air,
Love came so lightly
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as lovers
Creep at the middle noon,
Softly as players tremble
In the tears of a tune;

Quietly as lilies
Their faint vows declare,
Came the shy pilgrim:
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as tears fall
On a warm sin,
Softly as griefs call
In a violin;

Without hail or tempest,
Blue sword or flame,
Love came so lightly
I knew not that he came.

John Shaw Neilson

May

Shyly the silver-hatted mushrooms make
Soft entrance through,
And undelivered lovers, half awake,
Hear noises in the dew

Yellow in all the earth and in the skies,
The world would seem
Faint as a widow mourning with soft eyes
And falling into dream.

Up the long hill I see the slow plough leave
Furrows of brown;
Dim is the day and beautiful: I grieve
To see the sun go down.

But there are suns a many for mine eyes
Day after day:
Delightful in grave greenery they rise,
Red oranges in May.

John Shaw Neilson

Native Companions Dancing

On the blue plains in wintry days
The stately birds move in the dance.
Keen eyes have they, and quaint old ways
On the blue plains in wintry days.
The Wind, their unseen Piper, plays,
They strut, salute, retreat, advance;
On the blue plains, in wintry days,
These stately birds move in the dance

John Shaw Neilson

O Heart of Spring

O HEART of Spring!
Spirit of light and love and joyous day,
So soon to faint beneath the fiery Summer:
Still smiles the Earth, eager for thee alway:
Welcome art thou, soever short thy stay,
Thou bold, thou blithe newcomer!
Whither, O whither this thy journeying,
O heart of Spring?

O heart of Spring!
After the stormy days of Winter's reign,
When the keen winds their last lament are sighing,
The Sun shall raise thee up to life again:
In thy dim death thou shalt not suffer pain:
Surely thou dost not fear this quiet dying?
Whither, O whither this thy journeying,
O heart of Spring?

O heart of Spring!
Youth's emblem, ancient and unchanging light,
Uncomprehended, unconsumed, still burning:
Oh that we could, as thou, rise from the night
To find a world of blossoms lilac-white,
And long-winged swallows unafraid returning...
Whither, O whither this thy journeying,
O heart of Spring?

John Shaw Neilson

Old Granny Sullivan

A pleasant shady place it is, a pleasant place and cool -
The township folk go up and down, the children pass to school.
Along the river lies my world, a dear sweet world to me:
I sit and learn - I cannot go; there is so much to see.

But Granny she has seen the world, and often by her side
I sit and listen while she speaks of youthful days of pride;
Old Granny's hands are clasped; she wears her favourite faded shawl -
I ask her this, I ask her that: she says, 'I mind it all.'

The boys and girls that Granny knew, far o'er the seas are they,
But there's no love like the old love, and the old world far away;
Her talk is all of wakes and fairs - or how, when night would fall,
"Twas many a quare thing crept and came,' and Granny 'minds them all.'

The day she first met Sullivan - she tells it all to me -
How she was hardly twenty-one and he was twenty-three.
The courting days! the kissing days! - but bitter things befall
The bravest hearts that plan and dream. Old Granny 'minds it all.'

Her wedding-dress I know by heart; yes! every flounce and frill;
And the little home they lived in first, with the garden on the hill.
'Twas there her baby boy was born; and neighbours came to call,
But none had seen a boy like Jim - and Granny 'minds it all.'

They had their fights in those old days; but Sullivan was strong,
A smart quick man at anything; 'twas hard to put him wrong...
One day they brought him from the mine... (The big salt tears will fall)...
"Twas long ago, God rest his soul!' Poor Granny 'minds it all.'

The first dark days of widowhood, the weary days and slow,
The grim, disheartening, uphill fight, then Granny lived to know.
'The childer,' ah! they grew and grew - sound, rosy-cheeked and tall:
'The childer' still they are to her. Old Granny 'minds them all.'

How well she loved her little brood! Oh, Granny's heart was brave!
She gave to them her love and faith - all that the good God have.
They change not with the changing years; as babies just the same
She feels for them, though some, alas! have brought her grief and shame:

The big world called them here and there, and many a mile away:
They cannot come - she cannot go - the darkness haunts the day;
And I, no flesh and blood of hers, sit here while shadows fall -
I sit and listen - Granny talks; for Granny 'minds them all.'

Just fancy Granny Sullivan at seventeen or so,
In all the floating fin

John Shaw Neilson

Ownerless

He comes when the gullies are wrapped in the gloaming
And limelights are trained on the tops of the gums,
To stand at the sliprails, awaiting the homing
Of one who marched off to the beat of the drums.

So handsome he looked in the putties and khaki,
Light-hearted he went like a youngster to play;
But why comes he never to speak to his Darkie,
Around at the rails at the close of the day?

And why have the neighbours foregathered so gently,
Their horses a-doze at the fence in a row?
And what are they talkin' of, softly, intently?
And why are the women-folk lingering so?

One hand, soft and small, that so often caressed him,
Was trembling just now as it fondled his head;
But what was that trickling warm drop that distressed him?
And what were those heart-broken words that she said?

Ne'er brighter the paddocks that bushmen remember
The green and the gold and the pink have displayed,
When Spring weaves a wreath for the brows of September,
Enrobed like a queen, and a-blush like a maid.

The gums are a-shoot and the wattles a-cluster,
The cattle are roaming the ranges astray;
But why are they late with the hunt and the muster?
And why is the black horse unsaddled to-day?

Hard by at the station the training commences,
In circles they're schooling the hacks for the shows;
The high-mettled hunters are sent at the fences,
And satins and dapples the brushes disclose.

Sound-winded and fit and quite ready is Darkie,
Impatient to strip for the sprint and the flight;
But what can he keeping the rider in khaki?
And why does the silence hang heavy to-night?

Ah, surely he'll come, when the waiting is ended,
To fly the stiff fences and take him in hand,
Blue-ribboned once more, and three-quarters extended,
Hard-held for the cheers from the fence and the stand.

Still there can the cross-beam the saddle hangs idle.
The cobweb around the loose stirrup is spun;
The rust's on the spurs, and the dust on the bridle,
And gathering mould on the badges he won.

We'll take the old horse to the paddocks tomorrow,

Where grasses are waving breast-high on the plain;
And there with the clean-skins we'll turn him in sorrow
And muster him never, ah, never, again.

The bush bird will sing when the shadows are creeping
A sweet plaintive note, soft and clear as a bell's -
Oh, would it might ring where the bush boy is sleeping,
And colour his dreams by the far Dardanelles.

John Shaw Neilson

Schoolgirls Hastening

Fear it has faded and the night:
The bells all peal the hour of nine:
The schoolgirls hastening through the light
Touch the unknowable Divine.

What leavening in my heart would bide!
Full dreams a thousand deep are there:
All luminants succumb beside
The unbound melody of hair.

Joy the long timorous takes the flute:
Valiant with colour songs are born:
Love the impatient absolute
Lives as a Saviour in the morn

Get thou behind me Shadow-Death!
Oh ye Eternities delay!
Morning is with me and the breath
Of schoolgirls hastening down the way.

John Shaw Neilson

Song be Delicate

Let your song be delicate.
The skies declare
No war — the eyes of lovers
Wake everywhere.

Let your voice be delicate.
How faint a thing
Is Love, little Love crying
Under the Spring.

Let your song be delicate.
The flowers can hear:
Too well they know the tremble,
Of the hollow year.

Let your voice be delicate.
The bees are home:
All their day's love is sunken
Safe in the comb.

Let your song be delicate.
Sing no loud hymn:
Death is abroad . . . Oh, the black season!
The deep — the dim!

John Shaw Neilson

Song for a Singer

When you go underground with all your airs,
Your kindly lies and your ridiculous prayers,
You shall not ever fear to face again
The strong man's rage, the woman wild with pain
Nor song nor sigh will beat upon your brain.

The world will mourn you neither less nor more
Than all the pawns who played the game before;
The lover-lad will kiss his love anew
The water-birds will have their dance to do,
And the rude Spring will gallop over you.

The men who make will match the men who mar,
The eye unsatisfied will seek a star;
Your visitor the worm will speak you fair,
The bride will tremble and the child will stare,
And the red Summer will ride everywhere.

John Shaw Neilson

Tell Summer That I Died

When he was old and thin
And knew not night or day
He would sit up to say
Something of the fire within.
How woefully his chin
Moved so slowly as he tried
Some lusty word to say:
Tell Summer that I died.

When gladness sweeps the land,
And to the white sky
Cool butterflies go by,
And sheep in shadow stand;
When Love, the old command,
Turns every hate aside,
In the unstinted days
Tell Summer that I died.

John Shaw Neilson

The Break of Day

THE STARS are pale.
Old is the Night, his case is grievous,
His strength doth fail.

Through stilly hours
The dews have draped with love's old lavishness
The drowsy flowers.

And Night shall die.
Already, lo! the Morn's first ecstasies
Across the sky.

An evil time is done.
Again, as some one lost in a quaint parable,
Comes up the Sun.

John Shaw Neilson

The Crane is My Neighbour

The bird is my neighbour, a whimsical fellow and dim;
There is in the lake a nobility falling on him.

The bird is a noble, he turns to the sky for a theme,
And the ripples are thoughts coming out to the edge of a dream.

The bird is both ancient and excellent, sober and wise,
But he never could spend all the love that is sent for his eyes.

He bleats no instruction, he is not an arrogant drummer;
His gown is simplicity - blue as the smoke of the summer.

How patient he is as he puts out his wings for the blue!
His eyes are as old as the twilight, and calm as the dew.

The bird is my neighbour, he leaves not a claim for a sigh,
He moves as the guest of the sunlight - he roams in the sky.

The bird is a noble, he turns to the sky for a theme,
And the ripples are thoughts coming out to the edge of a dream.

John Shaw Neilson

The Gentle Water Bird (for Mary Gilmore)

In the far days, when every day was long,
Fear was upon me and the fear was strong,
Ere I had learned the recompense of song.

In the dim days I trembled, for I knew
God was above me, always frowning through,
And God was terrible and thunder-blue.

Creeds the discoloured awed my opening mind,
Perils, perplexities - what could I find? -
All the old terror waiting on mankind.

Even the gentle flowers of white and cream,
The rainbow with its treasury of dream,
Trembled because of God's ungracious scheme.

And in the night the many stars would say
Dark things unaltered in the light of day:
Fear was upon me even in my play.

There was a lake I loved in gentle rain:
One day there fell a bird, a courtly crane:
Wisely he walked, as one who knows of pain.

Gracious he was and lofty as a king:
Silent he was, and yet he seemed to sing
Always of little children and the Spring.

God? Did he know him? It was far he flew?
God was not terrible and thunder-blue:
- It was a gentle water bird I knew.

Pity was in him for the weak and strong,
All who have suffered when the days were long
And he was deep and gentle as a song.

As a calm soldier in a cloak of grey
He did commune with me for many a day
Till the dark fear was lifted far away.

Sober-apparelled, yet he caught the glow:
Always of Heaven would he speak, and low,
And he did tell me where the wishes go.

Kinsfolk of his it was who long before
Came from the mist (and no one knows the shore)
Came with the little children to the door.

Was he less wise than those birds long ago
Who flew from God (He surely willed it so)
Bearing great happiness to all below?

Long have I learned that all his speech was true;
I cannot reason it - how far he flew -
God is not terrible nor thunder-blue.

Sometimes, when watching in the white sunshine,
Someone approaches - I can half define
All the calm beauty of that friend of mine.

Nothing of hatred will about him cling:
Silent - how silent - but his heart will sing
Always of little children and the Spring.

John Shaw Neilson

The Green Singer

ALL singers have shadows
That follow like fears,
But I know a singer
Who never saw tears;
A gay love—a green love—
Delightful—divine:
The Spring is that singer—
An old love of mine!

All players have shadows,
And into the play
Old sorrows will saunter—
Old sorrows will stay.
But here is a player
Whose speech is divine:
The Spring is that player—
An old love of mine!

All singers grow heavy:
Their hours as they run
Bite up all the blossoms,
Suck up all the sun;
But I know a singer
Delightful—divine:
The gay love—the green love—
An old love of mine!

John Shaw Neilson

The Land where I was Born

HAVE you ever been down to my countree
Where the trees are green and tall?
The days are long and the heavens are high,
But the people there are small.
There is no work there; it is always play;
The sun is sweet in the morn;
But a thousand dark things walk at night
In the land where I was born.

Have you ever been down to my countree
Where the birds made happy Spring?
The parrots screamed from the honey-trees,
And the jays hopped chattering.
Strange were the ways of the water-birds
In the brown swamps, night and morn;
I knew the roads they had in the reeds
In the land where I was born.

Have you ever been down to my countree?
Have you ridden the horses there?
They had silver manes, and we made them prance
And plunge and gallop and rear.
We were knights of the olden time,
When the old chain-mail was worn:
The swords would flash and the helmets crash
In the land where I was born.

Have you ever been down to my countree?
It was full of smiling queens:
They had flaxen hair, they were white and fair,
But they never reached their teens.
Their shoes were small and their dreams were tall:
Wonderful frocks were worn;
But the queens all strayed from the place we played,
In the land where I was born.

I know you have been to my countree
Though I never saw you there;
I know you have loved all things I have loved,
Flowery, sweet, and fair.
The days were long,—it was always play;
But we,—we were tired and worn;
They could not welcome us back again
To the land where I was born.

John Shaw Neilson

The Loving Tree

Three women walked upon a road,
And the first said airily,
"Of all the trees in all the world
Which is the loving tree?"

The second said, "My eyes have seen
No tree that is not fair;
But the Orange tree is the sweetest tree,
The loving blood is there."

And the third said, "In the green time
I knew a loving tree
That gave a drink of the blood-red milk,
It was the Mulberry."

Then the first one said, "Of all the trees
No sweetest can I name;
Ask her who yonder slowly comes—
That woman lean and lame."

Grief like a hideous suckling hung
Along her hollow breast,
Pain was upon her as she walked,
And as she stooped to rest.

"Why will you question so?" she said,
"Is it to mock at me?
For how should I, who walk in Hell,
Know of a loving tree?"

"My eyes are not as woman's eyes,
They hope not east or west:
Dull Famine my bed-mate is,
And Loneliness my guest.

" 'Tis not the most delicious flower
That leaves the scent of Spring,
Nor is it yet the brightest bird
That loads his heart to sing.

"A tree may dance in the white weather
Or dream in a blue gown,
A tree may sing as a sweetheart
To bid the stars come down:

"Some trees are slim and lovable
And some are sleek and strong,
But the tree that has the cripple's heart
Will know the cripple's song.

"The sweetest death is the red death
That comes up nakedly,

And the tree that has the foiled heart
It is the loving tree.

"While ever lip shall seek for lip,
While ever light shall fall,
The tree that has the ruined heart
Is tenderest of all.

"Oh, ye may have your men to kiss,
And children warm to hold,
But the heart that had the hottest love
Was never yet consoled."

The women three walked on their way,
Their shamed eyes could see
How well the tree with the foiled heart
Is still the loving tree.

John Shaw Neilson

The Meeting of Sighs

YOUR voice was the rugged
old voice that I knew;
I gave the best grip of
my greeting to you.
I knew not of your lips—
you knew not of mine;
Of travel and travail
we gave not a sign.

We drank and we chorused
with quips in our eyes;
But under our song was
the meeting of sighs.
I knew not of your lips—
you knew not of mine;
For lean years and lone years
had watered the wine.

John Shaw Neilson

The Orange Tree

The young girl stood beside me.
I Saw not what her young eyes could see:
- A light, she said, not of the sky
Lives somewhere in the Orange Tree.

- Is it, I said, of east or west?
The heartbeat of a luminous boy
Who with his faltering flute confessed
Only the edges of his joy?

Was he, I said, borne to the blue
In a mad escapade of Spring
Ere he could make a fond adieu
To his love in the blossoming?

- Listen! the young girl said. There calls
No voice, no music beats on me;
But it is almost sound: it falls
This evening on the Orange Tree.

- Does he, I said, so fear the Spring
Ere the white sap too far can climb?
See in the full gold evening
All happenings of the olden time?

Is he so goaded by the green?
Does the compulsion of the dew
Make him unknowable but keen
Asking with beauty of the blue?

- Listen! the young girl said. For all
Your hapless talk you fail to see
There is a light, a step, a call
This evening on the Orange Tree.

- Is it, I said, a waste of love
Imperishably old in pain,
Moving as an affrighted dove
Under the sunlight or the rain?

Is it a fluttering heart that gave
Too willingly and was reviled?
Is it the stammering at a grave,
The last word of a little child?

- Silence! the young girl said. Oh, why,
Why will you talk to weary me?
Plague me no longer now, for I
Am listening like the Orange Tree.

John Shaw Neilson

The Poor Can Feed the Birds

Ragged, unheeded, stooping, meanly shod,
The poor pass to the pond: not far away
The spires go up to God.

Shyly they come from the unpainted lane;
Coats have they made of old unhappiness
That keeps in every pain.

The rich have fear, perchance their God is dim;
'Tis with the hope of stored-up happiness
They build the spires to Him.

The rich go out in clattering pomp and dare
In the most holy places to insult
The deep Benevolence there.

But 'tis the poor who make the loving words.
Slowly they stoop; it is a Sacrament:
The poor can feed the birds.

Old, it is old, this scattering of the bread,
Deep as forgiveness, or the tears that go
Out somewhere to the dead.

The feast of love, the love that is the cure
For all indignities—it reigns, it calls,
It chains us to the pure.

Seldom they speak of God, He is too dim;
So without thought of after happiness
They feed the birds for Him.

The rich men walk not here on the green sod,
But they have builded towers, the timorous
That still go up to God.

Still will the poor go out with loving words;
In the long need, the need for happiness
The poor can feed the birds.

John Shaw Neilson

The Poor, Poor Country

Oh 'twas a poor country, in Autumn it was bare,
The only green was the cutting grass and the sheep found little there.
Oh, the thin wheat and the brown oats were never two foot high,
But down in the poor country no pauper was I.

My wealth it was the glow that lives forever in the young,
'Twas on the brown water, in the green leaves it hung.
The blue cranes fed their young all day - how far in a tall tree!
And the poor, poor country made no pauper of me.

I waded out to the swan's nest - at night I heard them sing,
I stood amazed at the Pelican, and crowned him for a king;
I saw the black duck in the reeds, and the spoonbill on the sky,
And in that poor country no pauper was I.

The mountain-ducks down in the dark made many a hollow sound,
I saw in sleep the Bunyip creep from the waters underground.
I found the plovers' island home, and they fought right valiantly,
Poor was the country, but it made no pauper of me.

My riches all went into dreams that never yet came home,
They touched upon the wild cherries and the slabs of honeycomb,
They were not of the desolate brood that men can sell or buy,
Down in that poor country no pauper was I.

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The New Year came with heat and thirst and the little lakes were low,
The blue cranes were my nearest friends and I mourned to see them go;
I watched their wings so long until I only saw the sky,
Down in that poor country no pauper was I.

John Shaw Neilson

The Smoker Parrot

He has the full moon on his breast,
The moonbeams are about his wing;
He has the colours of a king.
I see him floating unto rest
When all eyes wearily go west,
And the warm winds are quieting.
The moonbeams are about his wing:
He has the full moon on his breast.

John Shaw Neilson

To A Blue Flower

I would be dismal with all the fine pearls of the crown of a king;
But I can talk plainly to you, you little blue flower of the Spring!
Here in the heart of September the world that I walk in is full
Of the hot happy sound of the shearing, the rude heavy scent of the wool.
Soon would I tire of all riches or honours or power that they fling;
But you are my own, of my own folk, you little blue flower of the Spring!
I was around by the cherries to-day; all the cherries are pale:
The world is a woman in velvet: the air is the colour of ale.
I would be dismal with all the fine pearls of the crown of a king;
But I can give love-talk to you, you little blue flower of the Spring!

John Shaw Neilson

You and Yellow Air

YOU, AND YELLOW AIR by John Shaw Neilson

I dream of an old kissing-time
And the flowered follies there;
In the dim place of cherry-trees,
Of you, and yellow air.

It was an age of babbling,
When the players would play
Mad with the wine and miracles
Of a charmed holiday.

Bewildered was the warm earth
With whistling and sighs,
And a young foal spoke all his heart
With diamonds for eyes.

You were of Love's own colour
In eyes and heart and hair;
In the dim place of cherry-trees
Ridden by yellow air.

It was the time when red lovers
With the red fevers burn;
A time of bells and silver seeds
And cherries on the turn.

Children looked into tall trees
And old eyes looked behind;
God in His glad October
No sullen man could find.

Out of your eyes a magic
Fell lazily as dew,
And every lad with lad's eyes
Made summer love to you.

It was a reign of roses,
Of blue flowers for the eye,
And the rustling of green girls
Under a white sky.

I dream of an old kissing-time
And the flowered follies there,
In the dim place of cherry-trees,
Of you, and yellow air.

John Shaw Neilson