

Classic Poetry Series

# **Nancy Fotheringham Cato**

## **- poems -**

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# Nancy Fotheringham Cato(1917 - 2000)

Nancy Fotheringham Cato AM was an Australian writer who published more than twenty historical novels, biographies and volumes of poetry. Cato is also known for her work campaigning on environmental and conservation issues.

Cato was born in Glen Osmond in South Australia, and was a fifth-generation Australian. She studied English Literature and Italian at the University of Adelaide, graduating in 1939, then completing a two-year course at the South Australian School of Arts. She was a cadet journalist on The News from 1935 to 1941, and as an art critic from 1957 to 1958.

With Roland Robinson and Kevin Collopy, in 1948 Cato was one of the founding members of the Lyre-Bird Writers, an independent and cooperative group that formed to publish verse by Australian writers. As a member of the Jindyworobak Movement, Cato edited the 1950 Jindyworobak Anthology, one of a series of anthologies produced to promote indigenous Australian ideas and customs, particularly in poetry. She was actively involved in the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Australian Society of Authors during the 1950s and 1960s.

Cato's books include: Green Grows The Vine, Brown Sugar and All The Rivers Run, which was made into a TV mini-series. Her book Mister Maloga told the story of Daniel Matthews and his Maloga Mission to Aboriginal people on the Murray River in Victoria.

Cato became a local icon in Noosa, Queensland area and has a park and restaurant named after her. The Noosa Parks Association made her a life member and an honorary park ranger for her work in conservation. In 1984, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to literature and the environment, and she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by the University of Queensland in 1991. In 2006 a new suburb of Franklin was proposed for Canberra with the streets named after Australian women writers. The suburb is to include Nancy Cato Street.

Cato married Eldred Norman, and travelled extensively overseas with him. They had one daughter and two sons. Dr Nancy Cato Norman died at Noosa Heads on 3 July 2000. Cato's cousin was also named Nancy Cato and was host of children's TV show the Magic Circle Club in the mid 1960s.

**Works**

Her first published novel was a bestseller. *All The Rivers Run* (1958), a saga of life along the Murray, Australia's largest river, made her modestly rich and famous, popularised Australia overseas and became a television series.

The novel took a decade to write, and its success, especially in the United States, enabled Cato to give up journalism - she had been the Queensland correspondent of the *Canberra Times* - and focus on her writing and love of conservation. The book became the first of a trilogy - with *Time, Flow Softly* (1959) and *But Still The Stream* (1962) - which, when published in a single volume, became popular around the world.

Ever the patriotic, fifth-generation Australian, Cato was unimpressed when her British publishers mistakenly put a Mississippi steamer, with its stern paddle, on the cover instead of a Murray steamer, whose paddles are amidships.

Cato had discovered the Murray river on a holiday in the 1930s. Her family believed the first novel's leading character, Philadelphia Gordon, was in part modelled on the author, who married at 24 and had three children in three years.

In all, Cato wrote more than 10 big novels, often featuring strong, outback women. She also produced volumes of poetry, short stories and *The Noosa Story: A Study In Unplanned Development* (1979), an environmental work about her adopted Queensland home.

She started writing at the age of eight - when she composed a short poem about a violet - and 10 years later won a short-story competition run by the *News*, the local paper in her hometown of Adelaide. Her imaginary "interview" with *Oliver Twist* led to her being taken on as a trainee journalist - with time off to go to university - but she recalled that, as a woman, she had to fight to get into the reporters' room.

But her early novels were not always well received, and the manuscript of one ended up being flung into the Thames. It was read by Paul Scott, of *Raj* quartet fame, who said Cato had a good writer's eye - but still turned it down. "I had rejection, rejection, rejection," Cato recalled. "If you can't take rejection, you'll never be a writer." Seven years later, another collection, *The Dancing Bough* (1957), brought her wider acclaim before the appearance of *All The Rivers Run*.

*Brown Sugar* (1974), a novel about Queensland and the trade in indentured workers from the south Pacific, was another success. Cato also wrote three books about Tasmania, one about the last Aboriginal woman on the island, *Queen*

Truganini (1976), and A Distant Island (1988), based on the life of botanist Ronald Gunn. The Heart Of The Continent, about two generations of outback and wartime nurses, followed in 1989. Cato was honoured with a doctorate of letters by the University of Queensland in 1990.

# Daybreak

The greatest show on Earth  
(non stop twenty four hours around the world)  
Begins with a curtain-rise  
of soft pink cloud  
and a blare of golden trumpets;  
The Sun's rebirth  
we have seen it all before  
we don't even bother to get out of bed,  
or, if we're up already, we take heed  
only to see will it be fine today  
for our trip to the shore,  
or the mountains; will it rain  
for the school picnic,  
will the races go on  
or the test match be postponed?  
And yet, one day, if the  
sun should not rise,  
what a loud refrain  
of despair and horror  
would run,  
circling the whole Earth  
as each place found  
that today the golden trumpets  
would not sound,  
and the show was over!  
We should think of each day  
as our last for seeing the sun.

Nancy Fotheringham Cato

# The Road

I made the rising moon go back  
behind the shouldering hill,  
I raced along the eastern track  
till time itself stood still.

The stars swarmed on behind the trees,  
but I sped fast at they,  
I could have made the sun arise,  
and night turn back to day.

And like a long black carpet  
behind the wheels, the night  
unrolled across the countryside,  
but all ahead was bright.

The fence-posts whizzed along wires  
like days that fly too fast,  
and telephone poles loomed up like years  
and slipped into the past.

And light and movement, sky and road  
and life and time were one,  
while through the night I rushed and sped,  
I drove towards the sun.

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# Willy-Wag And Sparrow

Willy-wag and Sparrow  
sat on a stone.  
Said Willy, it's cold  
when the sun is gone.

But my heart beats hot  
in my white silk breast;  
time enough later  
for me to rest.

Said Sparrow, It's dark  
in the green willow,  
and the cat may lurk  
in the shade below.

He fluffed his feathers  
and shook his head;  
by now the others  
are safe in bed.

Said Willy, the sky  
is full of light,  
and a juicy fly  
is quickly caught.

I'll flirt my fan  
awhile the cold,  
and I won't go in  
till the moon is gold.

Said sparrow, the tree  
is full by now,  
and I'm off to my perch  
on the topmost bough.

But Willy said, whether  
it's dark or light,  
if I feel like singing  
I'll sing all night.

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