

Classic Poetry Series

**William E. Marshall**  
**- poems -**

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# William E. Marshall(1 April 1859 - 1923)

William E. Marshall was a Canadian poet and lawyer.

## <b>Life</b>

Marshall was born in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, the son of Adelaide Amelia Allison and James Noble Shannon Marshall. He went to the County Academy and then to Mount Allison College Academy. He entered his father's law office in 1876, and was admitted to the bar in 1881. In 1891 he became Registrar of Deeds in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia. In 1883 Marshall married Margaret Jane Bingay Campbell. The couple had one son and one daughter. Marshall published his one book of poetry, *A Book of Verse*, locally in 1909. His poem "Brookfield," a threnody for his friend Robert R. McLeod (who had died in 1909) was published in the *University Magazine* of April 1914, bringing him national attention.

## <b>Writing</b>

Archibald McMechan, *Montreal Standard*: "To be remembered – to have your name engraven not on some pompous marble, but in the fleshly tables of a loving heart – to have a gentle light ever burning before the inner shrine of a human memory, is the measure of fame the wise man covets.... Here is a poem of twenty-five Spenserians celebrating with simple earnestness an unknown man, unknown even to his contemporaries. No such poem has appeared in Canada since Roberts' 'Ave!' In dignity and depth of feeling, 'Ave,' DeMille's 'Behind the Veil' and 'Brookfield' stand together—a noble trio.... That in these noisy self-advertising days there should be men like Marshall quietly doing their duty in their narrow spheres, but reaching out to the stars through Literature and Art, makes for the nation's moral health.... Perhaps the technique of the poem is not flawless; but its heart is right. Through it shines a faith in man and God, a love of the simple, eternal, unchanging things, and above all, the devotion of a sacred memory. These rare qualities make 'Brookfield' an event in Canadian literature."

# Brookfield

Now hath a wonder lit the saddened eyes  
Long misted by a grievous winter clime;  
And now the dull heart leaps with love's surprise,  
And sings its joy. For 'tis the happy time;  
And all the brooding earth is full of chime;  
And all the hosts of sleepers under ground  
Have burst out suddenly in glorious prime;  
And all the airy spirits now have found  
Their wonted shrines with life and love entwined 'round.

And now I no more sorrow for the dead,  
The friend I love hath pain of death no more,  
He hath mortality forever shed,  
He is of happiness the spirit's core.  
And my heart's memory brims, yea, runneth o'er,  
With lavish bounty of his teeming worth;  
(What times he did his garnered wealth outpour,  
In wisdom's word and deed and pleasure's mirth)  
Wherefore my soul hath joy in life's great freedom-birth.

And so, I mount the richest sunset hill,  
Singing the wandering echo of a fame  
That shall forever have its roaming will  
In love-awakened hearts where dwells the name  
Of him whose genius, burning to high flame,  
Was reared within these woods with spark divine.  
Brookfield! Thy beauty slept, until he came  
To wake thee up to visions that were thine  
Hadst thou but dreamed what lay beyond the rule and line.

Hadst thou but dreamed! Ah, dreamers 'neath the blue  
Of day, the dreamers in the starry night,  
Pillowed on stone and kissed by sun and dew!  
On ye, the ardours of the Infinite  
Descend in winged raptures, and the light  
Of Heav'n stirreth to bliss each mortal pain,  
Wide opening dreaming eyes in spirit sight!—  
Alas! how many waken up again,  
Singing their ecstasy unto the wind and rain.

Behold, one cometh in the spirit now!– 1

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A wraith of tender, melancholy song–  
The once familiar friend of bird, and bough,  
And flower, and brook, and meadow. Not for long  
He wandered with the meagre, vagrant throng  
Of shepherds piping in the early day.  
Death mocked his young heart-ease; and soon among  
Forgotten things a woeful shepherd lay:  
And soon the melody grew faint and died away.

On yonder hill, close to a great high road,  
Made by the pioneers from sea to sea,  
The Poet lay, unheeded;–and the load  
Upon his broken heart sank heavily  
With cattle's tread, and withered grew the tree  
That bent o'er him, and dwindled to a path  
The great highway that was so wide and free;–  
Only a chance-hewn stone of poorest worth  
Clung like a widowed love to his dead, buried earth.

We know his fellow-shepherds cried to Heaven,  
And thrilled the winds with their melodious loss;  
And doubtless, some late-straying sheep were driven,  
By that rude, wailing music's urge, to cross  
The moonlit stream and crop the golden moss;  
And evermore were changed from sheep to man,  
And evermore cared not for wordly dross,  
And evermore heard call of Spring, and ran  
Into the joyous woods to follow after Pan.

And He, our freedom's guide, our Spirit's friend,  
Had more than loving word for that lone grave,  
Where homing neighbour never came to lend  
Its presence. His warm heart was moved to save,  
From utter, last neglect, a name that gave  
The grace of life in songs now little read,  
Since other ease of heart we most do crave.  
Dear Friend! Whose love our weak remembrance fed,

Thou gav'st our silent bard a home among the dead.<sup>2</sup>

Among the mounds of love—no more alone—  
With charity of marble at his head,  
And, clinging to his feet, that poor, chance stone,

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Now, in the churchyard, rests the long lost dead.  
What though his coming was unheralded  
With pomp and praise, he hath his meed of earth;  
And on his grave the flowers he loved are spread,  
And many a kindly eye will read his worth,  
And sometimes there the heart of love be poured forth.

Lo! now, another comes to swell the praise: <sup>3</sup>  
He bringeth far-off memory of the sea,  
And of the pathless woods' alluring maze,  
And of the ringing ax, and crashing tree,  
And first log hut, and brush fire setting free  
The age-imprisoned soil to ease the needs  
That crown the pioneer's hard destiny.  
Haply, the warring world no braver breeds,  
Than he who turns a forest into waving meads.

Yet still we sing: Saul hath his thousands slain,  
And David tens of thousands! As of old,  
We make great holiday of bloodiest gain,  
And wreath the shining victor's head with gold,  
And bless his gory trophies, and unfold  
Them in Love's sacred temple, and outpour  
Loud gratitude to God—that didst uphold  
Our hands to kill our brother man in war.  
Ah! Christ is dead,—and we the Roman Guard adore.

But see this happy village festival,<sup>4</sup>  
Where all the country folk are gathered round  
Responsive to the clear, vibrating call  
Of one uplifted voice,—whose echoes sound  
Above the hill-tops now. This toil-won ground  
Is holy; here the burning bush flamed high  
One hundred years ago, when faith was crowned

In the first settler's log hut built near by,  
And love, in that rude home, was blessed with children's cry.

Not that the Venturer grew rich or great,  
Or seemed a hero or was honoured more  
By those who followed him to conquer fate

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In the far wilderness; nor that he bore  
Himself as one who paid for other's score;  
But that among the forest immigrants,  
He was the first life-bringer to explore  
These hills, where the shy Indian had his haunts,  
And prove the settler's worth, beyond the body's wants.

And it was well the body's wants were few,  
To those who made the homes here-day by day  
Toiling and sweating while they hacked and slew  
The forest, burned the brush, and cleared away  
For garden patch and grain, and flax and hay,-  
But ah! the wives in rudest suffering strong!  
Little of rest there was for such as they,  
Little save care, ev'n in the baby song  
They crooned, in midst of work for all the household throng.

And yet they were not sad-these pioneers:  
(Tales have been told of humour all their own,  
And of their wit that crackled unawares,  
And of their sturdy way, and look, and tone,  
And high assurance when their work was done.)  
Surely, for them, the thrush at evening sang,  
The Pleiades and great Orion shone,  
And the life-giving sun in splendour sprang,  
And the glad harvest moon her golden lamp did hang.

Long years ago, they went to take their rest  
Beneath the spreading trees on yonder hill-  
The field they cleared for use at God's behest,  
And where the quiet tenants of his will  
Are undisturbed of any joy or ill.  
And here and there, white stones with carven name

Tell who lies covered up, forever still:  
But the First Settler has a shaft of flame  
Reared by the villagers unto his worth and fame.

Since then the years have flown, flown like the wind  
That passeth o'er this hill, laden with life.  
This is the hill where I was sure to find  
My friend in days of old. Here, I am rife  
In freedom—not from the surcease of strife  
Of God with man (Lord, Lord, cease not with me!)  
But, from the bloodless Fate with hidden knife,

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Shearing the heart aspiring to be free  
Of lust and greed and self, whate'er the prize may be.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,  
Whence cometh help! My help is in the Lord!  
Behold, O man, what is it that He wills  
Of thee! But to do justice in accord,  
And to love mercy better than the sword,  
And to walk humbly in the sight of Him:  
Thus, is the olden vision still outpoured  
Upon the hills, for all whose eyes are dim  
With seeking in the places where the bale-fires swim.

Thus, am I in the spirit with my friend,  
Here in the village which he glorified;  
And unto which his heart would always wend,—  
Impatient of the world of human tide—  
When Spring began to call him to her side  
With robin's song and the arbutus trail,  
And all the lure of freedom undenied,  
And all the wistful life of hill and dale,  
And river, lake, and stream, and love that would not fail.

And as he roamed the shores and woods and clears,—  
Seeking, for aye, the bloom of yesterdays—  
The mayflowers smiled and lent their sweetest airs,  
And violets curtsied from the road-side ways;  
The red-veined slippers of the elves and fays

Were hanging near the rose and eglantine,  
And mystic trilliums still did heavenward gaze;  
The blue flags waved, and lilies gan to shine;  
The golden-rods and asters thronged the steep incline.

And something of that bloom was shown for me,  
One eager day, when the Rhodora flamed  
Her leafless beauty on us suddenly  
Down in an old-time pasture road, and claimed  
A first love's privilege, and was not shamed:  
My friend had fondest greeting for the flower,  
And gentlest love-speech ever poet framed;<sup>5</sup>  
And all my vagrant heart was stayed, with power  
Of love I never knew, until I shared his dower.

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Ah, he was richly dowered of the earth!  
The grain of sand, the daisy in the sod,  
Awoke his heart; and early he went forth,  
Through field and wood, with young eyes all abroad;  
And saw the nesting birds, and beck and nod  
Of little creatures running wild and free,  
Which know not that they know, yet are of God!  
And kept his youth, and grew in sympathy,  
And loved his fellows more, and had love's victory.

To such as heard, he was an answerer  
Of things that lay outside the rule and line.  
To those who loved, the follower of a star  
That led him on and on with heavenly sign,  
And lit his soul, and made his utterance shine;  
So he went forth to many in his day:  
And when he passed beyond at Sun's decline,  
Some who had never seen him caught the ray;  
And some came then to praise who could have cheered his way.

There is the little cabin in the tree,<sup>6</sup>  
Where sometimes he would go for solitude,  
And ease of heart, and thoughtful reverie,  
And rain upon the roof, and dreamy mood,  
And light the world hath never understood.

Ah me! the door is broken now, and wide:  
And yet, I feel as if it might intrude  
Upon a resting soul to look inside,–  
Such is the quietness and lack of earthly pride.

O Friend! who so didst joy of knowledge use,  
That men look up and brighten at thy name,  
And speak of genius, and put by the news  
To tell some good of one death cannot claim,  
Nor life require to read in sculptured fame.  
The wind upon the hill hath sweetest hush;  
The day is melting into tenderest flame;  
And from the valley, where the waters rush,  
Comes up the evensong of the lone hermit-thrush.

William E. Marshall