

Classic Poetry Series

**Frederick Robert Higgins**  
**- poems -**

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# Frederick Robert Higgins(24 April 1896 - 6 January 1941)

Frederick Robert Higgins was an Irish poet and theatre director.

Higgins was born on the west coast of Ireland in Foxford, which is located in County Mayo. He grew up in Ballivor in County Meath, and then spent the largest part of his adult life in Dublin, in a house he had built beside the River Dodder in Rathfarnham. His health was poor, and though his friends were inclined to regard him as a hypochondriac, his prediction that he would die young was accurate.

## Career

Higgins was a student of William Butler Yeats and served on the board of the Abbey Theatre from 1935 until his death. His best-known book of poetry is *The Gap of Brightness* (1940). He is also well known for his poem, *Father and Son*. He wrote a moving elegy for his fellow poet Pádraic Ó Conaire. He was generally acknowledged as a fine poet, but was less successful in his Abbey Theatre work: Frank O'Connor said unkindly that Higgins could not direct a children's poetry recitation.

He was a popular and convivial man- even Frank O'Connor, who came to regard him with deep suspicion, admitted that he was a delightful person to meet. His circle of friends included many of the leading Irish literary figures of his time, including Yeats, Padraic O Conaire, George William Russell, Lennox Robinson, and for a time Frank O'Connor. O'Connor however came to regard Higgins as untrustworthy and a troublemaker, and describes him unflatteringly in his memoir *My Father's Son*. For Yeats, at least Higgins seems to have had genuine affection, once remarking that he never left Yeats' house without " feeling like a thousand dollars". He was capable of great kindness and generosity to younger writers like Patrick Kavanagh.

He died suddenly of a heart attack in January 1941.

# All Soul's Even

THE grey air was thinning  
Over the red lake,  
Shading pale herons  
Scarcely awake;  
Until on still grasses,  
On shores of cold dew,  
The bright ring of sunset  
More brightly grew.

Then mooring my curragh  
In yew trees awhile,  
I crushed through the wet dusk  
Of a deep isle;  
And cleaving boughs over  
One moonless place,  
I stood in the pale light  
Of a pale face.

That face it moved gently  
As dew on the air;  
'O come,' she said softly,  
Her eyes told me where;  
Her words they grew dreamy,  
Her voice gave no fear-  
The voice of my true love  
Dead for a year!

I loosened my curragh  
From a yew bough,  
Surrounded by music-  
I scarcely hear now  
Away on grey waters,  
Away on the lake,  
And half of my senses  
Barely awake.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# Chinese Winter

From these bare trees  
The sticks of last year's nests  
Print sad characters against the moon;  
While wind-blown moonlight,  
Stripping fields to silver,  
Scrawls December on each frozen pool.

Light washed on each tree  
Roots it in black shadow,  
As last year's love now roots me in black night;  
And where love danced  
Footprints of fiery moments  
Flash out memorials in silent ice.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# Connemara

THE soft rain is falling  
Round bushy isles,  
Veiling the waters  
Over wet miles,  
And hushing the grasses  
Where plovers call,  
While soft clouds are falling  
Over all.

I pulled my new curragh  
Through the clear sea  
And left the brown sailings  
Far behind me,  
For who would not hurry  
Down to the isle,  
Where Una has lured me  
With a smile.

She moves through her sheiling  
Under the haws,  
Her movements are softer  
Than kitten's paws;  
And shiny blackberries  
Sweeten the rain,  
Where I haunt her beaded  
Window-pane.

I would she were heeding-  
Keeping my tryst-  
That soft moon of amber  
Blurred in the mist,  
And rising the plovers  
Where salleys fall,  
Till slumbers come hushing  
One and all.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# Elopement

Now that the grey wet of the road makes quiet  
Each step we take, ah, there can float  
No stir in the air, but the stir of a cuckoo  
Hopping its double note!  
So hurry, black darling; from this sharp parish  
We'll swiftly walk, with love as our fare  
Until the far blue walls of the mountains  
Are gapped with yellow air

It's down the hazy pale slabs of water,  
Through the bushy towns we'll quietly go -  
Just telling each hour by the passing colour  
On the mountains of Mayo!  
And soon on Bailassa you'll grow quite happy:  
Its river gardens will shelter none  
Who eyed your secret, where barren valleys  
Were harvesting the sun

O maybe we'll live a while in Killala,  
Where few things change with tide and tree,  
Where love has been weaned and the streets in mildew  
Just hobble to the lean sea!  
There even my jealousy would believe you -  
Were you ever so dreamy after the men  
Of a town that yawned as the French marched through it  
And never woke since then!

So hurry, my love, sunset may be shadowed  
By one cloud roosting on a hill wind!  
Ah hurry, black darling, and near the lake water -  
With Lahardaun behind -  
By moonlight we'll rest and maybe love's hunger  
We'll break to the nod of a shy bulrush;  
So may tonight pull sleep on our senses  
In the spilt shadow of a bush.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# Father And Son

Only last week, walking the hushed fields  
Of our most lovely Meath, now thinned by November,  
I came to where the road from Laracor leads  
To the Boyne river-that seems more lake than river,  
Stretched in uneasy light and stript of reeds.

And walking longside an old weir  
Of my people's, where nothing stirs-only the shadowed  
Leaden flight of a heron up the lean air-  
I went unmanly with grief, knowing how my father,  
Happy though captive in years, walked last with me there.

Yes, happy in Meath with me for a day  
He walked, taking stock of herds hid in their own breathing;  
And naming colts, gusty as wind, once steered by his hand,  
Lightnings winked in the eyes that were half shy in greeting  
Old friends-the wild blades, when he gallivanted the land.

For that proud, wayward man now my heart breaks-  
Breaks for that man whose mind was a secret eyrie,  
Whose kind hand was sole signet of his race,  
Who curbed me, scorned my green ways, yet increasingly loved me  
Till Death drew its grey blind down his face.

And yet I am pleased that even my reckless ways  
Are living shades of his rich calms and passions-  
Witnesses for him and for those faint namesakes  
With whom now he is one, under yew branches,  
Yes, one in a graven silence no bird breaks.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# Muineen Water

I know a small lake that sails the palest shadows,  
Trailing their frail keels along its waveless sand;  
And when isles of grey turf are sunning in its shallows  
The far hill is a blue ghost on that land.

Down there my wild heart is startled by the quiet:  
The very stones are spying; each tree is a pry;  
The light declares against me and exiled from brightness  
I stray from those waters invaded by the sky.

But when the sedges fling their bridge of whispers  
On waves no moon has hooked, then surely I find,  
As that lake into its own dim presence,  
A dark calm sinks into my mind.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# O You Among Women

When pails empty the last brightness  
Of the well, at twilight-time,  
and you are there among women -  
O mouth of silence,  
Will you come with me, when I sign,  
to the far green wood, that fences  
A lake inlaid with light?

To be there, O, lost in each other,  
While day melts in airy water,  
And the drake-headed pike - a shade  
In the Waves' pale stir!  
For love is there, under the breath,  
As a coy star is there in the quiet  
Of the wood's blue eye.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# Padraic O'Conaire Gaelic Storyteller

They've paid the last respects in sad tobacco  
And silent is this wakehouse in its haze;  
They've paid the last respects; and now their whiskey  
Flings laughing words on mouths of prayer and praise;  
And so young couples huddle by the gables.  
O let them grope home through the hedgy night -  
Alone I'll mourn my old friend, while the cold dawn  
Thins out the holy candlelight.

Respects are paid to one loved by the people;  
Ah, was he not - among our mighty poor -  
The sudden wealth cast on those pools of darkness,  
Those bearing, just, a star's faint signature;  
And so he was to me, close friend, near brother,  
Dear Padraic of the wide and sea-cold eyes -  
So, lovable, so courteous and noble,  
The very west was in his soft replies.

They'll miss his heavy stick and stride in Wicklow -  
His story-talking down Winetavern Street,  
Where old men sitting in the wizen daylight  
Have kept an edge upon his gentle wit;  
While women on the grassy streets of Galway,  
Who hearken for his passing - but in vain,  
Shall hardly tell his step as shadows vanish  
Through archways of forgotten Spain.

Ah, they'll say, Padraic's gone again exploring;  
But now down glens of brightness, O he'll find  
An alehouse overflowing with wise Gaelic  
That's braced in vigour by the bardic mind,  
And there his thoughts shall find their own forefathers -  
In minds to whom our heights of race belong,  
In crafty men, who ribberd a ship or turned  
The secret joinery of song.

Alas, death mars the parchment of his forehead;  
And yet for him, I know, the earth is mild -  
The windy fidgets of September grasses

Can never tease a mind that loved the wild;  
So drink his peace - this grey juice of the barley  
Runs with a light that ever pleased his eye -  
While old flames nod and gossip on the hearthstone  
And only the young winds cry.

Frederick Robert Higgins

# Song For The Clatter-Bones

God rest that Jewy woman,  
Queen Jezebel, the bitch  
Who peeled the clothes from her shoulder-bones  
Down to her spent teats  
As she stretched out of the window  
Among the geraniums, where  
She chaffed and laughed like one half daft  
Titivating her painted hair—

King Jehu he drove to her,  
She tipped him a fancy beck;  
But he from his knacky side-car spoke,  
'Who'll break that dewlapped neck?'  
And so she was thrown from the window;  
Like Lucifer she fell  
Beneath the feet of the horses and they beat  
The light out of Jezebel.

That corpse wasn't planted in clover;  
Ah, nothing of her was found  
Save those grey bones that Hare-foot Mike  
Gave me for their lovely sound;  
And as once her dancing body  
Made star-lit princes sweat,  
So I'll just clack: though her ghost lacks a back  
There's music in the old bones yet.

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# The Dark Breed

WITH those bawneen men I'm one,  
In the grey dusk-fall,  
Watching the Galway land  
Sink down in distress-  
With dark men, talking of grass,  
By a loose stone wall,  
In murmurs drifting and drifting  
To loneliness.

Over this loneliness,  
Wild riders gather their fill  
Of talking on beasts and on fields  
Too lean for a plough,  
Until, more grey than the grey air,  
Song drips from a still,  
Through poteen, reeling the dancing-  
Ebbing the grief now!

Just, bred from the cold lean rock,  
Those fellows have grown;  
And only in that grey fire  
Their lonely days pass  
To dreams of far clovers  
And cream-gathering heifers, alone  
Under the hazels of moon-lighters,  
Clearing the grass.

Again in the darkness,  
Dull knives we may secretly grease,  
And talk of blown horns on clovers  
Where graziers have lain;  
But there rolls the mist,  
With sails pulling wind from the seas-  
No bullion can brighten that mist,  
O brood of lost Spain.

So we, with the last dark men,  
Left on the rock grass,  
May brazen grey loneliness

Over a potten still  
Or crowd on the bare chapel floor  
Hearing late Mass,  
To loosen that hunger  
Broken land never can fill.

Frederick Robert Higgins