

Classic Poetry Series

Henry Mackenzie Green
- poems -

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Henry Mackenzie Green(2 May 1881 - 9 September 1962)

Henry Mackenzie Green, journalist, librarian and literary historian, was born on 2 May 1881 at his grandfather's home, Ecclesbourne, Double Bay, Sydney, eldest of seven children of native-born parents George Henry Green, bank manager, and his wife Agnes Isabella, daughter of James Norton. He was also descended from a number of early pioneers, among them John Blaxland, Alexander Kenneth McKenzie and Thomas Walker. Harry attended (1890-98) All Saints College, Bathurst; he was dux of the school, distinguished himself in sport and contributed to the school magazine, the Bathurstian. At the University of Sydney (B.A., 1902; LL.B., 1905) he graduated with first-class honours in logic and mental philosophy. President of the university union and editor (1905) of *Hermes*, he was awarded a Blue for athletics and was prominent in football, boxing and rowing. He won the university prize for English verse (1903, 1904), the Beauchamp prize for an English essay (1904, 1906, 1907) and the Wentworth medal (1904). In 1907-08 he travelled in Europe, reading, writing and studying art, music and drama. He was admitted to the Bar in Sydney on 24 February 1908, but never practised.

Beginning work (for thirty shillings a week) in 1909 with the Sydney Morning Herald, where Charles Bean was a colleague, Green was employed by the Daily Telegraph in 1910-20. Although 'Saturday's work was fairly easy and Sunday's quite easy', he discovered that his hours had no limit. Nevertheless, he appreciated the rigorous training in accuracy, speed and versatility that he received, particularly from Charles Theakstone of the Herald and Fred Ward of the Telegraph, and progressed to writing leading articles and book reviews. At St Mark's Anglican Church, Darling Point, on 9 August 1911 he had married Maria Eleanor Watson, a university graduate who shared his literary interests; they were to have two daughters. 'Sundays' at their Killara home became a meeting-place for poets, novelists, academic colleagues and students.

In 1911 the Australian Journalists' Association was formed. Green helped to draft the constitution of the New South Wales branch and retained a long-term relationship with the association. Responsible for 'War Notes' (1914-17) in the Telegraph, he published short stories, articles, literary criticism and verse in the Bulletin, *Hermes*, *New Triad* and the *Lone Hand*; his work later appeared in the *Australian Quarterly* and *Australian Highway*. On 25 March 1918 he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force; he embarked for Europe on 14 October but only reached Cape Town when the Armistice was signed; characteristically, while at

sea he drew on the ship's company to produce a literary magazine, the Wyreemian.

Green succeeded John Le Gay Brereton as librarian at the University of Sydney in 1921. Extraordinarily energetic, he built up the Australian holdings of the Fisher Library virtually from scratch, often searching in second-hand bookshops, establishing valuable archives and maintaining communication with numerous Australian writers. The professional standing of the library increased markedly during his administration; academic qualifications were made a condition of permanent appointment; and the Fisher was probably the first Australian library to make use of microphotography.

Prominent in Sydney's literary circles, Green belonged to the Casuals Club. He knew Christopher Brennan, Arthur Adams, Miles Franklin, (Dame) Mary Gilmore, A. G. Stephens and Bertram Stevens, and enjoyed close relationships with Hugh McCrae, Brereton and Robert FitzGerald. Living at Killara allowed him to indulge his love of the bush and outdoor activities, and he frequently undertook long bush walks in various parts of New South Wales. The effects of these activities were remarked upon by A. D. Hope who recalled Green's large head and 'nordic eye', his 'neat hard frame' and the 'colouring of a man who works a lot with his hands and spends time out of doors'; Louis Kahan's sketch, first published in *Meanjin* (1961), emphasized the same youthful traits.

Librarianship represented merely the core of Green's activities. He delivered university, extension and Workers' Educational Association lectures, gave talks to literary societies such as the Shakespeare Society of New South Wales and the Australian English Association, marked essays and corrected papers for university and public examinations, judged competitions on literary subjects, and belonged to the British Drama League, the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Sydney P.E.N. Club. In addition, he regularly spoke on radio for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and was president (1941-43) of the Australian Institute of Librarians and patron of the Australian English Association. When the Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures were established in 1940, Green was one of the handful of lecturers with any thorough knowledge of Australian literature whose talents were employed. Meanwhile, much of his lecturing was unpaid or underpaid, a condition that he deplored but tolerated.

By 1930 Green's lectures on Australian literature were recognized as a required part of a university course. In 1933 he applied for the chair of English literature at the university; despite support from some influential individuals, he was unsuccessful. Besides his uncollected short stories, essays and articles, Green's publications were extensive. Poetry was his first interest, but he wrote at least

one unpublished novel, 'The Aluminium God', and was represented in Australian Short Stories (1928), edited by George Mackaness. Green's verse was collected in two volumes, *The Happy Valley* (1925) and *The Book of Beauty* (London, 1929), which were well received by his contemporaries: P. R. Stephensen described *The Book of Beauty* as 'a significant episode in the evolution of Australian consciousness'; other friends made flattering comparisons with Yeats and Keats. In later life Green retained a keen interest in the genre, recognizing and encouraging younger poets such as Hope. Green also edited the 1943 volume in Angus & Robertson Ltd's annual Australian Poetry collections, as well as *Modern Australian Poetry* (1946). His critical and historical writing included *The Story of Printing* (1929); with (Sir) John Ferguson and Mrs A. G. Foster, *The Howes and their Press* (1936); five lectures, *Australian Literature: A Summary* (1928), *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1931), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1933), *Kendall* (1933) and *Wentworth as Orator* (1935); a study of Brennan (1939); and *Fourteen Minutes* (1944), a collection of his own radio talks.

Green divorced Eleanor in 1944. On 16 May that year, at the district registrar's office, Ashfield, he married 28-year-old Dorothy Auchterlounie, a poet and future literary critic; they lived at Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains and were to have a son and a daughter. After Green retired in 1946, he received a pension of £312, augmented in 1951 by a small C.L.F. pension. The family moved to Melbourne when Dorothy began lecturing at Monash University in 1961.

To this point, Green's most significant contribution as a literary historian was *An Outline of Australian Literature* (Sydney, 1930) which provided a more comprehensive and chronologically more extensive view of the field than Nettie Palmer's *Modern Australian Literature* (1924). Concentrating on creative writing from the beginning of European settlement to 1928, Green drew on years of research and personal experience, discussing such little known writers as Henry Handel Richardson, establishing numerous pioneer judgements which have largely stood the test of time, and demonstrating a variety which amazed contemporary cognoscenti. From 1939 to 1951 he contributed an annual survey of Australian literature to *Southerly* and in 1951 published *Australian Literature 1900-1950*.

His two-volume *A History of Australian Literature Pure and Applied* eventually emerged in 1961. By 1954 the manuscript had been completed to 1950, but was so delayed in publication that Green added short accounts of later works up to 1960. In the dedication he acknowledged his wife's contribution in their remarkable literary partnership, conceding that her 'critical suggestions, not always received with due gratitude, have made all the difference'.

In her 1984-85 revision, Dorothy described the History as 'a primary source'; by then it had become part of the literature it studied. A cornerstone of all later histories, it concentrated on creative writing and emphasized the links between Australian and European culture, but it also included critical surveys of the literature of science, psychology, economics, philosophy, journalism, history, biography, travel and reminiscence; if these aspects appeared quaint and old-fashioned in the critical climate of the 1960s, they have regained their appeal.

A man of his time, particularly in his dual allegiance to Britain and Australia, Green became more radical in his social views in old age. His students and colleagues remembered him as 'impulsive and generous, irascible at times, but scrupulously fair'. He was noted for his drive, energy and gusto, and his forceful but kindly personality. Survived by his wife and the children of both his marriages, Green died on 9 September 1962 at Box Hill and was cremated with Anglican rites; his estate was sworn for probate at £1037.

Bush Goblins

The Locust drones along the drowsy noon,
The brown bee lingers in the yellow foam,
Blossom on blossom searching deep, but soon
Slides heavy-wingèd home.

The vacant air, half visible, complains
All overburdened of its noontide hour;
Sound after sound in heavy silence wanes
At the strong sun's burning power.

Let the strong sun burn down the barren plain
And scour the empty heaven, and twist the air
To filmiest flickerings, o'er us in vain
His hollow vault doth glare.

For us gnarled boughs and massive boles o'ershade,
And tall bulrushes guard us with green spears
From the grim noon; our dewy jewelled glade
Never a footstep nears.

Come feast with us; behold our fragrant store
Of candied locusts, that no longer drone
Through summer eves, but transmigrated, pour
Thin goblin monotone

Through eucalyptine stillness as we rouse
Our gnomy anthem to the answering trees,
While gold-eyed toad-guards of our hidden house
Croak full-fed choruses.

Come visit us; O follow till you find
In some green shade our secret banquetings,
Where broilgas dance, and, some great stem behind,
A hidden lyrebird sings.

Ask of the eaglehawk in the blue air,
Ask of the chattering parrot, he should tell;
Fat possum in the tree bole, furry bear,
Us beast and bird know well.

The silver lizard on the sun-baked stone,
The green-flecked tree-snake in his circle coiled,
Dreaming of evil, man, and man alone
Missed us, howe'er he toiled.

Come feast thou with us; ancient kings of all,
We are the mystery at the heart of noon,
Weird unseen chucklers when long shadows fall
From the misleading moon.

We are the spirits of distorted trees;
We beckon down dim gullies, far astray,
Till lost, deep lost, the wild-eyed traveller sees
Dark at the heart of day.

And oh, we laughed about his last choked groans
Beside the water that he sought so long,
And oh, we danced about his clean-picked bones
To a gnomy undersong.

For all the day we chuckle and provoke
With mocking shapes and noises each bright hour,
But when dark even from his grave hath broke
Then are we lords of power.

Henry Mackenzie Green

Cunningham's Gap

As I came over Cunningham's Gap
a skin of time peeled off the map
The fern's green ocean overflowed
the hard black surface of the road
and lapped the wheel rims of the dray
and the sweating bullocks where they lay,
and washed the car out of today.
A cloud of cockatoos, snow on the hill
shrieked out of distance and were still.
Cedar, sassafras, bunya pine,
stinging nettle and lawyer-vine
baffled my passage and blocked my sight
as I swarmed the hummocks and climbed the height.
But long months' labour through wood and waste
dropped from my bones as I gazed at last.
round to round, to the rim of the sun,
on a world of richness not yet won;
broad fat pastures and rolling downs,
Wheat fields and Orchards, farms and towns,
ghosts of the future surged at the gate
of time and being and would not wait.
As I shouted in triumph, the Darling Downs
leapt into life with farms and towns;
Wheat field and orchards, flocks and herds,
grass to the bellies, woke at my words.
the cloud of cockatoos, snow on the hill,
shrieked out of distance and were still,
and the skin of time crept over the map
as I started my car in Cunningham's Gap.

Henry Mackenzie Green