

Classic Poetry Series

William Henry Ogilvie

- poems -

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Drought

My road is fenced with the bleached, white bones
And strewn with the blind, white sand,
Beside me a suffering, dumb world moans
On the breast of a lonely land.
On the rim of the world the lightnings play,
The heat-waves quiver and dance,
And the breath of the wind is a sword to slay
And the sunbeams each a lance.

I have withered the grass where my hot hoofs tread,
I have whitened the sapless trees,
I have driven the faint-heart rains ahead
To hide in their soft green seas.

I have bound the plains with an iron band,
I have stricken the slow streams dumb!
To the charge of my vanguards who shall stand?
Who stay when my cohorts come?

The dust-storms follow and wrap me round;
The hot winds ride as a guard;
Before me the fret of the swamps is bound
And the way of the wild-fowl barred.

I drop the whips on the loose-flanked steers;
I burnt their necks with the bow;
And the green-hide rips and the iron sears
Where the staggering, lean beasts go.

I lure the swagman out of the road
To the gleam of a phantom lake;
I have laid him down, I have taken his load,
And he sleeps till the dead men wake.

My hurrying hoofs in the night go by,
And the great flocks bleat their fear
And follow the curve of the creeks burnt dry
And the plains scorched brown and sere.

The worn men start from their sleepless rest
With faces haggard and drawn;
They cursed the red Sun into the west
And they curse him out of the dawn.

They have carried their outposts far, far out,
But - blade of my sword for a sign! -
I am the Master, the dread King Drought,
And the great West Land is mine!

William Henry Ogilvie

From the Gulf

Store cattle from Nelanjie! The mob goes feeding past,
With half-a-mile of sandhill 'twixt the leaders and the last;
The nags that move behind them are the good old Queensland stamp-
Short backs and perfect shoulders that are priceless on a camp;
And these are men that ride them, broad-cheated, tanned, and tall,
The bravest hearts amongst us and the lightest hands of all:
Oh, let them wade in Wonga grass and taste the Wonga dew,
And let them spread, those thousand head-for we've been droving too!

Store cattle from Nelanjie! By half-a-hundred towns,
By northern ranges rough and red, by rolling open downs
By stock-routes brown and burnt and bare, by floodwrapped river-bends,
They've hunted them from gate to gate-the drover has no friends!
But idly they may ride to-day beneath the scorching sun
And let the hungry bullocks try the grass on Wonga run;
No overseer will dog them here to "see the cattle through,"
But they may spread their thousand head-for we've been droving too!

Store cattle from Nelanjie! They've a naked track to steer;
The stockyards at Wodonga are a long way down from here;
The creeks won't run till God knows when, and half the holes are dry;
The tanks are few and far between and water's dear to buy:
There's plenty at the Brolga bore for all his stock and mine-
We'll pass him with a brave God-speed across the Border Line;
And if he goes a five-mile stage and loiters slowly through,
We'll only think the more of him-for we've been droving too I

Store cattle from Nelanjie! They're mute as milkers now;
But yonder grizzled drover, with the care-lines on his brow,
Could tell of merry musters on the big Nelanjie plains,
With blood upon the chestnut's flanks and foam upon the reins;
Could tell of nights upon the road when those same mild-eyed steers
Went ringing round the river bend and through the scrub like spears;
And if his words are rude and rough, we know his words are true,
We know what wild Nelanjies are-and we've been droving too !

Store cattle from Nelanjie! Around the fire at night
They've watched the pine-tree shadows lift before the dancing light;
They've lain awake to listen when the weird bushvoices speak,
And heard the lilting bells go by along the empty creek;
They've spun the yarns of hut and camp, the tales of play and work,
The wondrous tales that gild the road from Normanton to Bourke;
They've told of fortunes foul and fair, of women false and true,
And well we know the songs they've sung-for we've been droving too!

Store cattle from Nelanjie! Their breath is on the breeze;
You hear them tread, a thousand head, in blue-grass to the knees;
The lead is on the netting-fence, the wings are spreading wide,
The lame and laggard scarcely move so slow the drovers ride!
But let them stay and feed to-day for sake of Auld Lang Syne;
They'll never get a chance like this below the Border Iodine;
And if they tread our frontage down, what's that to me or you?

What's ours to fare, by God they'll shared for we've been droving tool

William Henry Ogilvie

His Gippsland Girl

Now, money was scarce and work was slack
And love to his heart Crept in,
And he rode away on the Northern track
To war with the world and win;
And he vowed by the locket upon his breast
And its treasure, one red gold curl,
To work with with a will in the farthest West
For the sake of his Gippsland girl.

The hot wind blows on the dusty plain
And the red sun burns above,
But he sees her face at his side again,
And he strikes each blow for love.
He toils by the light of one far-off star
For the winning of one white pearl,
And the swinging pick and the driving bar
Strike home for the Gippsland girl.

With an aching wrist and a back that's bent,
With salt sweat blinding eyes,
'Tis little he'd reek if his life were spent
In the winning so grand a prize.
His shear blades flash and over his hand
The folds of the white fleece curl,
And all day long he sticks to his stand
For the love of his Gippsland girl.

When the shearing's done and the shed's cut out
On Barwon and Narran and Bree;
When the shearer mates with the rouseabout
And the Union man with the free;
When the doors of the shanty, open wide,
An uproarious welcome hurl,
He passes by on the other side
For the sake of his gippsland girl.

When summer lay brown on the Western Land
He rode once more to the South,
Athirst for the touch of a lily hand
And the kiss of a rosebud mouth;
And he sang the songs that shorten the way,
And he envied not king or earl,
And he spared not the spur in his dappled grey
For the sake of his Gippsland girl.

At the garden gate when the shadows fell
His hopes in the dusk lay dead;
'Nelli? Oh! Surely you heard that Nell
Is married a month' they said.
He spoke no word; with a dull, dumb pain
At his heart, and his brain awhirl
He turned his grey to the North again

For the sake of his Gippsland girl.

And he rung the board in a Paroo shed
By the sweat of his aching brow,
But he blued his cheque, for he grimly said,
'There is nothing to live for now.'
And out and away where the big floods start
And the Darling dust-showers swirl,
There's a drunken shearer who broke his heart
Over a Gippsland girl!

William H Ogilvie

William Henry Ogilvie

My Hat!

The hats of a man may be many
In the course of a varied career,
And some have been worth not a penny
And some have been devilish dear;
But there's one hat I always remember
When sitting alone by the fire.
In the depth of a Northern November,
Because it fulfilled my desire.

It was old, it was ragged and rotten
And many years out of mode,
Like a thing that a tramp had forgotten
And left at the side of a road.
The boughs of the mulga had torn it,
It's ribbon was naught but lace,
And old swaggie would not have worn it
Without a sad smile on his face.

When I took off the hat to the ladies
It was rather with sorrow than swank,
And often I wished it in Hades
When the gesture drew only a blank;
But for swatting a fly on the tucker
Or lifting a quart from the fire
Or belting the ribs of a buckler
It was all that a man could desire.

When it ought to have gone to the cleaner's

(And stayed there, as somebody said!)
It was handy for flogging the weaners
From the drafting-yard into the shed.
And oft it has served as a dish for
A kelpie in need of a drink;
It was all that a fellow could wish for
In many more ways than you'd think.

It was spotted and stained by the weather,
There was more than one hole in the crown,
And it made little difference whether
The rim was turned up or turned down.
It kept out the rain (in a fashion)
And kept off the sun (more or less),
But it merely commanded compassion
Considered as part of one's dress.

Though it wasn't a hat you would bolt with
Or be anxious to borrow or hire,
It was useful to blindfold a colt with
Or handle a bit of barbed wire.
Though the world may have thought it improper
To wear such old rubbish as that,
I'd have scorned the best London-made topper
In exchange for my old battered hat.

William Henry Ogilvie

The Australian

The skies that arched his land were blue,
His bush-born winds were warm and sweet,
And yet from earliest hours he knew
The tides of victory and defeat;
From fierce floods thundering at his birth,
From red droughts ravaging while he played,
He learned to fear no foes on earth –
“The bravest thing God ever made!”

The bugles of the motherland
Rang ceaselessly across the sea,
To call him and his lean brown band
To shape imperial destiny;
He went, by youth’s grave purpose willed,
The goal unknown, the cost unweighed,
The promise of his blood fulfilled –
“The bravest thing God ever made!”

We know - it is our deathless pride! –
The splendour of his first fierce blows,
How, reckless, glorious, undenied,
He stormed those steel-lined cliffs we know.
And none who saw him scale the height
Behind his reeking bayonet blade
Would rob him of his title-right –
“The bravest thing God ever made!”

Bravest, where half the world of men
Are brave beyond all earth's rewards,
So stoutly none shall charge again
Till the last breaking of the swords;
Wounded or hale, won home from the war,
Or yonder by the Lone Pine laid,
Give him his due forever more –
"The bravest thing God ever made!"

William Henry Ogilvie

The Bush, My Lover

The camp-fire gleams resistance
To every twinkling star;
The horse-bells in the distance
Are jangling faint and far;
Through gum-boughs torn and lonely
The passing breezes sigh;
In all the world are only
My star-crowned Gove and I.

The still night wraps Macquarie;
The white moon, drifting slow,
Takes back her silver glory
From watching waves below;
To dalliance I give over
Though half the world may chide,
And clasp my one true Lover
Here on Macquarie side.

The loves of earth grow olden
Or kneel at some new shrine;
Her locks are always golden-
This brave Bush-Love of mine;
And for her star-lit beauty,
And for her dawns dew-pearled,
Her name in love and duty
I guard against the world.

They curse her desert places!
How can they understand
Who know not what her face is
And never held her handy-
Who may have heard the meeting
Of boughs the wind has stirred,
Yet missed the whispered greeting
Our listening hearts have heard.

For some have travelled over
The long miles at her side,
Yet claimed her not as Lover
Nor thought of her as Bride:
And some have followed after
Through sun and mist for years,
Nor held the sunshine laughter,
Nor guessed the raindrops tears.

And if her droughts are bitter,
Her dancing mirage vain-
Are all things gold that glitter?
What pleasure but hath pain?
And since among Love's blisses
Love's penalties must live,
Shall we not take her kisses,

And, taking them, forgive?

The winds of Dawn are roving
The river-oaks astir . . .
What heart were torn of loving
That had no I've but her?
Till last red stars are lighted
And last winds wander West,
Her troth and mine are plighted-
The lover I love best!

William Henry Ogilvie

The Filling of the Swamps

Hurrah for the storm-clouds sweeping!
Hurrah for the driving rain!
The dull earth out of her sleeping
Is wakened to life again.
There are mirrors of crystal shining
Whenever the cloud-wrack breaks,
And grass-clad banks are twining
A wreath for the fairy lakes - - -
Lakes that are links in an endless chain
For the water is out in the swamps again!

Hurrah for the red-gums standing
So high on the range above!
Hurrah for the she-oaks bending
So low to the wave they love!
Hurrah for the reed-stems slender!
Hurrah for the shade they fling,
For the curve of the cygnet's splendour,
The sheen of the black duck's wing!
Hurrah for the clouds and the glorious rain - - -
The water is out in the swamps again!

Hurrah for the laughing water,
The songs that the streamlets sing!
Whish! The teal duck's mate has sought her
With a stroke of his mottled wing!

Hurrah for the deepening shadows,
The ibis's eagle-eyed,
The dash of the purple swallows,
To bury their breasts in the tide!
Woe! It is woe to the Drought-King's reign!
The water is out in the swamps again!
William Henry Ogilvie

The Last Muster

All day we had driven the starving sheep to the scrub where the axes ply,
And the weakest had lagged upon weary feet and dropped from the ranks to die;
And the crows Hew up from the rotting heaps and the ewes too weak to stand,
And the fences Haunted red skins like flags, and the dour drought held the land.
And at night as I lay a-dreaming, I woke, and a silver moon
Shone fair on a dancing river and laughed to a broad lagoon,
And the grass turned over the fences and rippled like ripening grain,
And clouds hung low on the hilltops, and earth smelt sweet with the rain.

And in at the open window the lowing of cattle came -
A mob that had never a laggard and never a beast that was lame;
And wethers, a thousand thousand, and ewes with their lambs beside,
Moved over the green flats feeding, spread river to ranges wide.

And horses whinnied below me, and leaning I watched them pass,
Lusty and strong and playful like horses on spring-tide grass
When they whinny one to another, strong-voiced, and a gallop brings
Foam to the Hank, be it only from paddock to stockyard wings.

Slowly they moved in the moon-mist, heads low in the cool night-dew,
Snatching the long bush grasses, breast-high as they wandered through;
Slowly they moved in the moon-mist, and never a horse on the plains
Was red with the gall of the collar or marked with a chafe of the chains.

And behind them a hundred drovers rode slow on their horses white,
All brave with their trappings of silver that Hashed in the silver light;
Buckle and stirrup and bridle, and spurs for their better speed -
Singing behind the cattle like drovers on royal feed.

And I cooed, and one came over that rode on the nearest wing,
And I called to him, "Ho, there, drover! say, whose is the mob you bring?"
Then he reined his horse by the window, all silver-bitted and shod,
And spoke, and his words rang sadly, "These are the cattle of God!"

So I said to him, "Where are they bound for?" and he raised his hand to the West:
They are bound for the star-fenced pastures on God's own rivers, to rest."
And I asked him "Where did you muster?" and he answered me sadly again,
"From every gully and sandhill, from every valley and plain,

"From the swamps of the green kapunyah, from the reeds at the red creek-side,
From the thickets of twisted mulga, from the clay-pans furrowed and dried,
From the track to the Western goldfields, from the ruts of the Great North Road,
Where the dingoes go and the crows fly low we have gathered the beasts of God."

And I said, "Then has God repented because that He sent no rain?
And has God looked down in His pity on the poor dumb beasts He has slain?"
But the drover turned in his saddle and answered, his eyes in mine,
"Not so; for the beasts were slaughtered by man of his greed's design:

"God gave to them feed and water and pastures so wild and wide
They had fed him a thousand million from here to the ocean side;
But man in his greed came after and fenced them on hill and plain

And cursed the God in His heaven that would not send them His rain;

"And man's be the blame of the bleaching bone and the shame of the rotting hide,
And the pity of lorn lambs crying alone on the wind-swept mountain-side,
Of the weak horse down in his harness, of the bullock dead by the dray,
Of the moan of the thirsty cattle for ever and ever and aye!"

And he spoke to his steed and left me - moved out on the mist it seemed,
And I woke to the red burned acres, and knew that I had but dreamed.

William Henry Ogilvie