

Classic Poetry Series

Inez Isabel Maud Peacocke

- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Inez Isabel Maud Peacocke(31 January 1881 - 1973)

Inez Isabel Maud Peacocke was born in Devonport, Auckland, on 31 January 1881. She was the daughter of Emily Frances Mitchell and her husband, Gerald Loftus Torin Peacocke, a Madeira-born English barrister, later editor of the *New Zealand Farmer*. Isabel's carefree childhood was spent by Cheltenham Beach, near Devonport. She was educated privately and then, in her early 20s, spent a year in England and Europe.

When she returned to Auckland the Dilworth Ulster Institute, later the Dilworth School, had been established for disadvantaged boys. In 1906 Peacocke was appointed as the first, and initially sole, teacher; by the end of the year there was a roll of 15 children aged from 6 to 10. She quickly established a reputation as a storyteller; some of her tales, as well as her retellings of the classics, were later published in Whitcombe's Story Books series.

Peacocke published her first children's novel, *My friend Phil*, in 1915, and was to publish 25 in total. Her experiences at the school undoubtedly contributed to her acute and often humorous observations of children, but they did not tempt her to write stories about school life, which were the most popular genre of the period. Her interest lay less in the interaction between children than in the relationship between parent and child. Many of her parents are at best snobbish, at worst irresponsible. The wise and good-humoured adults in her books are kindly uncles and aunts who take over where mothers and fathers have failed, and central to a number of stories is the problem of guardianship.

No other New Zealand author has given a more detailed picture of the period of the First World War. Soldiers leave for, and sometimes return injured from, the battlefield. Children are fatherless, unemployment and tuberculosis take their toll and people die because they cannot afford a doctor. In the 1920s Peacocke turned her attention to snobbery. In both *Quicksilver* (1922) and *Marjolaine* (1935), children of differing social backgrounds face obstacles to friendship from the wealthy parents of one or other of them.

On 30 June 1920 in the Holy Trinity Parish Church of Devonport, Peacocke married George Edward Cluett, a 66-year-old engineer from Portsmouth, England. They lived in Remuera and the next 16 years of a very happy, but childless, marriage saw some of her best children's writing. George Cluett died from cancer in 1936, and thereafter Peacocke wrote almost exclusively for adults under her married name.

These 16 adult novels lack the humour and vitality of her best work for children and are often overtly didactic. All of them show a reverence for marriage, which she sees as offering protection for women. The earlier books take for their themes the threat to young women's virginity from predatory males. In the later stories marriages themselves are threatened, and resolution of the difficulties is seen as preferable to divorce.

Peacocke's novels, both for children and adults, are a celebration of Auckland and its environs. Her characters sail on the harbour, take trams along Karangahape Road, and sometimes catch a rickety bus which rattles over dirt roads to the bush of the Waitakere Ranges and the magnificent surf beaches of the West Coast. Cheltenham Beach, where she grew up, is the setting for two of her children's novels and for the autobiographical *When I was seven* (1927). In spite of this sense of place she was little known in New Zealand. All her novels were published in Britain and distribution arrangements were poor.

Peacocke became increasingly involved with the literary scene in Auckland. She was a frequent contributor to the *New Zealand Herald*, a founding member of the New Zealand League of Penwomen (president in 1930), and a member of the Authors', Artists' and Playwrights' Association in London. A popular broadcaster, especially on the subject of Auckland, she delved into local history, presenting it in a lively, accessible manner. However, Peacocke never abandoned her interest in young people. She was a long-term supporter of the YMCA and of the Childhaven Association.

Peacocke's final years were spent in the Roskill Masonic Village, Onehunga, where she died from heart failure on 12 October 1973. She was buried with her husband in the Purewa cemetery. She had suffered the misfortune of living long enough to see her writing become unfashionable. Her greatest literary fault was undoubtedly an unevenness of style. Although at best her prose was incisive and satirical, at worst it was self-consciously slangy and coyly sentimental. She was, nevertheless, an accomplished storyteller, who knew the art of keeping the reader engrossed, and no other New Zealand writer has so convincingly depicted the life and times of Auckland in the years between the wars.

She was not well known in her own country as all of her books were published overseas - by Ward, Lock of London, England. Often they sold out in England, leaving none to be exported to New Zealand, thus preventing her local readers from enjoying the locally set stories. Her first novel was *'My Friend Phil'*, published in 1914 and illustrated by Margaret Tarrant. Its style - 'a family story' - resulted in her writing being compared with that of L M Alcott (USA), L M Montgomery (Canada) and Ethel Turner (Australia). Family stories, as they came

to be known, dealt with everyday family relationships rather than the usual serious trials and tribulations of first settlers in a new land. The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature considers that "Peacocke's novels in retrospect are more valuable as a reflection of their period than for their literary quality".

Isabel Peacocke wrote 22 children's books in the period 1914-1939, together with 17 adult books (some under the pseudonym of Mrs Cluett). She also edited classic stories for the Whitcombe story book series, penned several short fantasies, wrote plays and poems for radio programmes and contributed articles of a general nature to 'The New Zealand Herald'.

Although she was a teacher like many other children's authors (at the Anglican Dilworth School, which catered for disadvantaged boys), Isabel Peacocke didn't necessarily incorporate her experiences into her stories, although her depiction of parents as snobbish and irresponsible may have resulted from such experiences. Her children, on the other hand, are usually alert, high-spirited if well-intentioned and bright. Guardianship played a part in many of the stories, such adults having to repair damage inflicted by uncaring parents. Her books were written from an adult point of view and, according to the previously referenced Oxford history, "are likely to have appealed to older sisters, amused to see the antics of the younger ones recorded in print". There were two exceptions to this adult point of view: the narrators in both 'The Cruise of the Crazy Jane' and 'Cathleen with a 'C' were children.

Isabel Peacocke's ability was to write in a manner which kept her readers wanting to turn the page to find out what happened next. Her stories well reflected the attitudes and social life of the times in which she wrote. All of her novels with the except of the first were set in Auckland, at a time when other less brave local writers were using overseas locales, fearing that novels set in New Zealand would not find overseas markets. According to the Oxford history, "No novelist up to this time had provided children with so unforced and immediate a recognition of the urban and suburban domestic settings in which most lived...".

The Happy Islands

O FAR away, and far away,
The Happy Islands lie;
In bluer seas of calm than these,
Beneath a bluer sky.

The sea, a shining girdle, winds
Round cliff and cape and bay,
With flash and gleam, and there they dream,
O far and far away!

Upon a rim of sapphire sea,
As some sweet girl might lean
Her breast of snow, my Islands glow,
All exquisite and green.

The cliffs like shining ramparts rise,
The golden beaches gleam;
And thro' the hills sing silver rills,
And cataract and stream.

Bright in a mist of leaves, on height
And headland, waving high,
The flame-flowers lean, and burn between
Splendours of sea and sky.

The still, bright forests, massed and green,
Like painted woodlands glow
In shade and shine; and belts of pine
Climb up to meet the snow.

No burning drought with fevered breath,
Nor blight of bitter hail,
Blackens the yield of fruitful field,
Nor sears the flowery vale.

Ah me! my Isles! my Happy Isles!
The Isles that nurtured me;
My heart is fain to cross again
Those leagues of purple sea,—

To watch at sunset from the hills
The headlands fade in mist,
'Mid changing glows, of gold and rose
And Bloom-of-Amethyst.

I tread to-day a sunless strand
Under sad skies of grey,
But summer smiles in my fair Isles
So far and far away.

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