

Classic Poetry Series

Laura Elizabeth McCully
- poems -

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Laura Elizabeth McCully(1886-1924)

Laura Elizabeth McCully (1886-1924) is a Canadian poet.

Life

McCully was born in Toronto, the daughter of Helen (Fitzgibbon) and Samuel Edward McCully. As a teenager she began publishing poetry, and winning prizes in the Young People's Corner of the Toronto Mail and Empire. She was educated at University College, Toronto, graduating in 1909 with first-class honors in English, French, German, and history. She spent the 1909-1910 academic year as a fellow of Yale College.

Her first collection of poetry, *Mary Magdalene and other poems*, was published in 1914. During World War I she worked in a munitions plant, and worked on a translation of *Beowulf* into modern English.

Writing

James L. Hughes: "Miss McCully's poetry is enriched by classical illustrations, and expressed in forceful and melodious language. Her imagination relates us to the universe and to humanity. Wordsworth found new lessons in the fields and woods, and taught them; Lanier made trees, flowers and clouds our intimate friends; when we read Miss McCully's nature poems we are not conscious of the moralizing of the poet, we are in the glens ourselves looking at the afterglow, with the purity, the glory, the growth spirit and the transforming beauty of nature flowing into our lives. In a few flaming lines her stories reveal the love, the despair, and the ultimately triumphant faith of humanity. With tender pathos she unveils the evils of social and industrial conditions, and in clear tones arouses each soul, and makes it conscious of the splendour of the better conditions ahead, and thrills it with the determination to achieve for justice, freedom, and truth."

A Ballad Of The Lakes

My love she went a-sailing
Ere yet the day was done,
And a wind blew up, and a wind blew up,
Straight out of the setting sun.

I sat on a rock a-fishing
Where flashes the bronze-black fin
And the eddies swirl and suck and curl
When the river tide comes in.

She hailed me from the headland
And I saw the brown sail swing
Till the rope ran tight and it lifted light
As the sweep of a wild duck's wing.

'O where go ye a-sailing,
For the day will soon be done,
And see the shroud of shifting cloud
That's following up the sun?'

'It's off I am to the eastward,
To the rim of the world away,
Ply sail and oar for the far-off shore
And none shall bid me stay.'

So she sailed away to the eastward
To the far horizon's rim,
Where rosy kissed through a veil of mist
The line of the shore lay dim.

And the sun sank down the marshes,
In a field of flame he rolled,
The heaving track from the boat slipped back
Like a path of molten gold.

Each little wave seemed smiling,
Lips curled in a rosy bow,
Like a babe asleep on the breast of the deep
That rocked it to and fro.

And I sat on my rock a-fishing
While further down the west
The sun sank slow to his bed below
In the marshes' swaying breast.

Sudden a white owl hooted
From his nest in the pine hard by,
And a whip-poor-will sent an answer shrill
From the depths of the flaming sky.

I looked away to the westward
And there I saw it stand,
A cloud pure white and small and bright
As the palm of an opened hand.

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One leap to the jutting headland,-
Like a blow it stung my face,
The cap of wind with the threat behind
Of the squall that comes apace.

Out on the lake there widened
A wreathing ring of black,
And the spreading cloud like an out-flung shroud
Promised the coming wrack.

The waves rose white and frothing,
With a hiss like a rattlesnake
That glides at night past the lantern's light
On the path through a slimy brake.

Have you seen the inland waters
When the black squall rides the wave?
For it comes like light and there is no flight,
And you call on God to save,

As I, one breath, 'Save, save her!'
And I plunged in the driving roar,
For my light canoe pierced through and through
Lay high on the rocky shore.

Clean stroke, long breath, poised body,
They laugh at your manhood's pride,
The billows that seethe and drive in your teeth
When the breath cramps in your side.

A quarter-mile to the headland?
Ten miles of boiling hell!
Blind, choked and stung, bruised, tossed and flung
In a world that heaved and fell.

But once, from the crest of a comber
The gleam of a distant sail,
As slight a thing as a butterfly's wing
Tossed into the teeth of the gale.

On, on! Is your blood turned water?
Shall a straining muscle's pain,
Though it snap like tow, speak louder now
Than the cry of heart and brain?

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In my ears the roar of thunder,
In my eyes a spray blood-red,
But once I sank, lost wind and drank,
And something snapped in my head.

Do you know the way of the waters
When their sudden wrath is o'er?
Rubbish and wrack they cast safe back,
And they cast me on the shore.

Do you know the way of the waters,
The hungry, restless wave?
They take for toll a living soul
And no man knows the grave.

Then search no more by the marshes
Where the moon stands up so white,
Has never a bird through the silence stirred
All the long, bright summer night.

Then seek no more by the river
Where the water lilies gleam,
So pale and still, so ghostly chill
Like a dead face in a dream,

For the eyes may ache with seeking,
They may search till they see no more,
And the heart grow old and the pulse beat cold
Ere my love comes back to shore.

Laura Elizabeth McCully

Canoe Song At Twilight

Down in the west the shadows rest,
Little grey wave, sing low, sing low!
With a rhythmic sweep o'er the gloomy deep
Into the dusk of the night we go,
 And the paddles dip and lift and slip,
 And the drops fall back with a pattering drip;
The wigwams deep of the spirits of sleep
Are pitched in the gloom on the headland steep.
Wake not their silence as you go,
Little grey wave, sing low, sing low!

From your porch on high where the clouds go by,
Little white moon, look down, look down!
'Neath night's shut lid the stars are hid,
And the last late bird to his nest has flown.
 The slow waves glide and sink and slide
 And rise in ripples along the side;
The loons call low in the marsh below,
Night weaves about us her magic slow,–
Ere the last faint gleam in our wake be gone,
Little white moon, look down, look down!

Laura Elizabeth McCully

Mary Magdalene Soliloquizes

Sing, heart of spring, along the winter ways,
Go lightly feet, 'twas here His footsteps fell,
The birds sing of Him for he counted them
And knew them all, the little wingèd loves
Like happy thoughts! Yea, every leaf that kissed
Him passing in the garden hath such life
As puts our immortality to shame.
The winds are pregnant with His message now,
The universal, all-uniting winds

That know no limitation, like the spirit
Of mighty truths, sweeping creation's bounds,
Disdaining man-made barriers, change and time.

Yea, since He came, sing resurrected soul,
As nature sings, through winter unto spring!
For now the ancient curse is past away,
The simple way and straight made plain to man
And love exalted, love revealed, proclaimed.
Not love that self has sought for selfish ends,
Nor love possessing or possessed, but love
Creating, sacrificing, binding all,
Conceiving good but as the good of all,
Laying down life that life may be fulfilled
In the new life that springs a thousandfold
More rich for sacrifice. O perfect bliss
Which man alone of all creation failed
To grasp, to comprehend! See how the earth
Meekly and sweetly, with a sure content,
Lays down the old year's leaves, yields to the wind
Her precious, garnered seeds, nor makes complaint,
But in her heart, all lowly, sings of spring;
See her emerge from tempest, recreate,
Instinct with life, noble and large and calm,
At peace with the infinite purposes of God!

Sing, heart of spring, along the wintry way
His blessèd feet made glad. Weep not for Him,
Nor for the world, nor for thy human pain.

Could'st thou have died as He did, who could rend
That place from thee? Most perfect was His part,
But thou hast shine, to succour, heal and teach,
Even as He, perchance to die as He
For man. Sing, happy heart, along life's way
For joy and love are met in thee and life
Wells new within thee, sing for spring is here,
Sing, for shine eyes have seen the Risen Lord!

Laura Elizabeth McCully

Our Little Sister

Weep, little shrinking spirits of the woods,
Hang down your fair, green faces, all ye leaves,
And dews be heavy on the year's firstborn,—
Yea, weep as rain, all ye that breathe of spring,
To-day I passed her in the city streets!

Surely the kind brown earth must pity her,
Nursing its young so safely at the breast,
All the great winds that no man may defile
Compassionate her, and the bending trees
Happy in fruitfulness and blest with song!

But where her feet are set of all God made
No stone remains; and wearing childhood's face
Fixed in an awful lethargy and calm,
Defiled, defiling, yet accusing not,
Avenged upon her race, she passes on.

Laura Elizabeth McCully

The Troubadour's Lyre

Sing low, my precious lyre, low in each string,
Thou wast not framed for exaltation's burst,
Or chant sustained, straining thy golden chords,
Sing low, sing low, thou constant friend, my lyre!

For now we two may wander forth in peace,
Shattered our shackles are and stricken from us,
And we shall rise and steal out into the world,
Singing all day, on every way, my lyre.
Like Orpheus have we two sojourned through hell,
And with our eyes seen evil, nor availed
To wrest their treasure from the envious shades.
Therefore come forth, leave to the Gods their world!

If we should find that orchard lamped with gold
Of heart's desire, fasting will we pass on,
Nor rifle one small, new-blown wayside flower,
But bless its beauty, pass, and passing, sing.

Thus shall we travel light of foot and free,
And call the world our garden and the woods

Our house, and hear the great winds call to us,
And sometimes feel the dripping of the dews
In lonely places. Come, for we are free.
O lyre, heart of my heart, formed for the wind
That is God's breath, and not for human hands
Jangling amid the strings, come, let us go!

Laura Elizabeth McCully