

Classic Poetry Series

**Thomas Bracken**  
**- poems -**

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# Thomas Bracken(21 December 1843 – 16 February 1898)

a late 19th century poet. He wrote "God Defend New Zealand", one of the two National anthems of New Zealand and was the first person to publish the phrase "God's Own Country" as applied to New Zealand.

## Background and Early Years

Bracken was born at Clones, County Monaghan, Ireland. His mother died when he was an infant and his father when he was 10 years old. He was sent to Australia when 12 to join his uncle, John Kiernan, at Geelong, Victoria. He was apprenticed to a pharmacist, but moved around to work on farms as a shearer and drover, and for a time was a gold fossicker and store keeper. At that time he began writing tales about the activities of the diggers involved in the goldrush, and about stock men and sheep men.

## Move to New Zealand and Journalistic and Writing Career

In early 1869 at the age of 25 he moved to Dunedin in New Zealand where a volume containing a selection of poems he had written in Australia was published. While working as a shearer and at various odd jobs, he carried on writing, and published a small book of verses *Flights among the Flax*. This was noticed in literary circles, and he won the Otago Caledonian Society's prize for poetry.

Determined to enter journalism, Bracken took a staff position on the *Otago Guardian* (and also wrote for *The New Zealand Tablet* and the *Morning Herald*). While at the *Guardian* he met John Bathgate who soon after, in 1875, established the *Saturday Advertiser* 'to foster a national spirit in New Zealand and encourage colonial literature'.

Bracken became editor and immediately began to encourage local writers. Talented contributors were attracted and the *Advertiser's* circulation reached 7000 copies which was a notable achievement for that era. Encouraged by this literary and commercial success, Bracken contributed some of his own satire, humour and verse, including *God Defend New Zealand* published in 1876 which was widely admired and became the national anthem He wrote *Not Understood* in 1879.

Although he often used the pseudonyms Paddy Murphy and Didymus, the prolific works under his own name soon became published worldwide and he became famous throughout Australia and New Zealand. Later publications of his works in bound editions included *Flowers of the Freeland*, *Behind the Tomb and Other Poems*, *The Land of the Maori and the Moe*, *Musings in Maoriland* and *Lays and Lyrics: God's Own Country and Other Poems*.

A supporter of the egalitarian policies of Governor Sir George Grey, Bracken championed sovereignty for the native Māori people, and later criticised the government for what he saw to be breaches of its obligations to the Treaty of Waitangi.

He had arrived in New Zealand when colonial troops were engaged in war with Chief Te Kooti who went into battle under his own distinctive flag. It had three symbols which some claim were meant to signify stars. Bracken's national anthem asks God to "guard Pacific's triple star" and some historians have reasoned that refers to Te Kooti's flag and is his oblique support for Māori. It has also been suggested that "Pacific's triple star" simply means the three main islands of New Zealand -- Northern, Middle and Stewart as they were referred to at that time. Bracken never explained what he meant, so there is no definitive clarification today. (There have been suggestions that Bracken was referring to Alpha Centauri, the very bright triple star in the Milky Way, visible only in the Southern Hemisphere. That is impossible because Proxima Centauri, the third star in Alpha Centauri, was not discovered until 1915, some 49 years after Bracken wrote his anthem.) Bracken was a freemason.

### Political Career

Vitally interested in current events and politics, Bracken stood for Parliament in the City of Dunedin electorate in the 1879 general election. He was unsuccessful at that time.

However, Bracken won the Dunedin Central electorate at the 1881 general election. He lost the seat to James Bradshaw at the next general election but when Bradshaw died in 1886, he won the 1886 by-election and resumed his seat until the end of the term in 1887, when he retired.

### Later Career

He later established Thomas Bracken and Co with Alexander Bathgate to buy and operate the *Evening Herald* until it was superseded in 1890 by the liberal *Globe*.

Like many multi-talented and successful writers, Bracken was not a prudent person and eventually became financially embarrassed. He became a bill reader in parliament, but was forced to leave Wellington and return to Dunedin when his health deteriorated.

## Death

He died 16 February 1898, and is buried in the Dunedin Northern Cemetery. A lookout nearby, with views across the city, is named in his honour.

# God Defend New Zealand

O Lord, God,  
of nations and of us too  
Listen to us,  
Cherish us  
Let goodness flourish,  
May your blessings flow.  
Defend  
Aotearoa

Let all people,  
Red skin, white skin  
Maori, Pakeha,  
Gather before you  
May all our wrongs, we pray,  
Be forgiven  
So that we might say long live,  
Aotearoa

May it be forever prestigious,  
May it go from strength to strength  
May its fame spread  
Far and wide,  
Let not strife  
Nor dissension ensue,  
May it ever be great  
Aotearoa

Let its territory,  
Be ever enlightened  
Throughout the land,  
Let envy and dissension  
Be dispelled,  
Let peace reign  
Over  
Aotearoa.

Let its good features endure,  
Let righteousness and honesty  
Prevail,

Among the people of God  
Let it never be ashamed,  
But rather let its name be known  
Thereby becoming the model to emulate  
Aotearoa.

E Ihowa Atua, (Ihoa)  
O ngā iwi mātou rā,  
Äta whakarongona;  
Me aroha noa.  
Kia hua ko te pai;  
Kia tau tō atawhai;  
Manaakitia mai  
Aotearoa.

Öna mano tängata  
Kiri whero, kiri mä,  
Iwi Mäori Päkehä  
Rüpeke katoa,  
Nei ka tono ko ngä hë  
Mäu e whakaahu kë,  
Kia ora märire  
Aotearoa.

Töna mana kia tü!  
Töna kaha kia ü;  
Tona rongo hei paku  
Ki te ao katoa  
Aua rawa ngä whawhai,  
Ngä tutu a tata mai;  
Kia tupu nui ai  
Aotearoa.

Waiho töna takiwä  
Ko te ao marama;  
Kia whiti töna rä  
Taiäwhio noa.  
Ko te hae me te ngangau  
Meinga kia kore kau;  
Waiho i te rongo mau  
Aotearoa.

Töna pai me toitü;  
Tika rawa, pono pü;  
Töna noho, täna tü;  
Iwi nö Ihoa.  
Kaua möna whakamä;  
Kia hau te ingoa;  
Kia tü hei tauira;  
Aotearoa.

Thomas Bracken

# M'Gillviray's Dream

A Forest-Ranger's Story.

JUST nineteen long years, Jack, have passed o'er my shoulders  
Since close to this spot we lay waiting the foe;  
Ay, here is the mound where brave Percival moulders,  
And yonder's the place where poor Norman lies low;  
'Twas only a skirmish — just eight of our number  
Were stretch'd on the sward when the fighting was done;  
We scooped out their beds, and we left them to slumber,  
The bold-hearted fellows went down with the sun.  
The month was October — young Summer was peeping  
Through evergreen forests where Spring, still supreme,  
Spread all the rich tints that she had in her keeping  
On tree, shrub, and bush, while each brooklet and stream  
With babblings of joy ran along to the river —  
But, hang it, old man, I am going too far;  
I talk as I used to when from Cupid's quiver  
Flew darts of affection my bosom to scar.  
I'm not much at poetry, Jack, though I've written  
Some nonsense in verse when my heart was aglow  
With what they call love — have you ever been smitten  
By some artful minx who deceived you? What, no?  
By Jove, you've been lucky; but, Jack, I'm digressing.  
Our quarters were here, under Lusk, and we made  
Our camp in the church without asking a blessing;  
This place is still known as the Mauku Stockade.  
I'd fought with Von Tempsky along the Waikato;  
I'd seen the green banks of that fair river dyed  
With British blood, red as the plumes of the rata  
When Spring scatters scarlet drops thick in her pride.  
I cared not for danger, and fighting was pleasure,  
The life of a Ranger was one of romance —  
A dare-devil fool ever ready to measure  
A savage's length with my rifle. 'Twas chance  
That sent me among them; I lived but for glory;  
My comrades were all of good mettle and true,  
And one was a hero; I'll tell you his story —  
God rest poor M'Gillviray — brave-hearted Hugh!  
I knew him for years, Jack, and shoulder to shoulder

He stood by me often when swift leaden hail  
Whizzed close to our ears. Ah! old man, I was bolder  
In those valiant days than I'm now. To my tale: —

The morning was gloomy, and Hugh sat beside me;  
We'd chumm'd in together for two years or more;  
I found him a brick, and he said when he tried me  
In front of the foe, "Dick, you're true to the core!"  
Enough — we were friends, and in trouble or danger  
We stuck by each other in camp and in fray.  
How often we find in the breast of a stranger  
The heart of a kind brother throbbing always  
With warmest affection, responsive and tender —  
Hugh's breast had a tenant like this, and I knew  
In him I'd a brother, a friend, a defender,  
Prepared for whatever a brave man might do.  
The morning was dark, and the outlook was dreary;  
I noticed my comrade was sitting alone,  
All thoughtful, disconsolate, pallid, and weary,  
"Why, where has the gladness of yesterday flown?  
Come, tell me, Hugh, why you are gloomy this morning;  
What change has come over my light-hearted mate?  
You've not" (and I laughed) "had a Banshee's death-warning,  
Have Brownies or Goblins been sealing your fate?"  
He turned his pale face, while his eyes, full of sorrow,  
Met mine, and it seemed like the gaze of the dead;  
I spoke once again: "Hugh, we'll meet them to-morrow,  
Fierce Rewi is coming this way." Then he said —

"Why am I sad? Ah, comrade kind,  
We cannot tell why shadows fall  
Across the soul and o'er the mind;  
We cannot tell why dreams recall  
Old scenes endeared by mem'ry's spell,  
Old haunts where love and sorrow met,  
Old spots where airy castles fell,  
And Hope's young sun for ever set;  
We cannot tell why thought should leap  
Across the ocean's wide expanse,  
And through the telescope of sleep  
Review the dead years at a glance;  
We cannot tell— But why should I

Philosophize? We know we're here,  
And for the wherefore and the why,  
That problem suits the sage and seer,  
But not the soldier. Listen, mate —  
I'm not a coward, for I've stood  
Full face to face with death, and fate  
Has led me safe through scenes of blood;  
But now my hour is drawing nigh,  
Life's battle now is nearly done,  
For me to-morrow's arching sky  
Shall canopy no rising sun."

"Why, comrade, you but jest," I said;  
"You shouldn't joke with me, you know;  
To-morrow's sun shall shine o'erhead,  
And see us watching for the foe."

"Nay, comrade, we must part to-day,  
A hand has beckon'd through the gloom,  
And signalled me away, away  
To brighter realms beyond the tomb;  
You smile and count me as a slave  
Of superstition — be it so;  
My vision stretches o'er the grave;  
I travel where you cannot go.  
Ah! friend, you were not nursed beneath  
The Highland hills, where every glen  
Is filled with those who've conquered death —  
Is tenanted with ghosts of men.  
Ah! friend, your feet have never trod  
The mighty Bens, whose summits grim  
Approach the starry gates of God,  
Where heaven grows bright and earth grows dim.  
The legendary lore that clings  
Round Highland hearts you have not felt,  
Nor yet the weird imaginings  
Which stir the spirit of the Celt.  
Well, hear my story — listen, pray,  
And I'll explain why I am sad  
And in a downcast mood to-day.  
You smile again and deem me mad —  
Last night I was again a boy  
Light-hearted 'mong my native hills,

Filled with a bright, ecstatic joy,  
And pure as my own mountain rills;  
I stood beneath old Monagh Leagh,  
Nor far from rugged Dumnaglass,  
And in the distance I could see  
Wild Farracagh's romantic Pass;  
A monarch proud, a youthful king,  
Alone with nature there I stood,  
At peace with God and everything,  
For all His works seemed fair and good;  
But best and fairest of them all  
Was she who came to meet me there, —  
I little thought dreams could recall  
Those silken waves of sunny hair,  
That tender smile, those eyes of blue,  
The magic of whose flashing glance  
Inflamed my soul with love, and threw  
A glamour round me, — joyous trance!  
We met last night just as of old,  
And Elsie nestled by my side,  
While playing with each tress of gold  
I whispered, 'Lassie, be my bride.'  
The sweet soft answer came — why dwell  
On that dear moment of delight?  
Our heaven was in that Highland dell,  
Where all seemed beautiful and bright.  
We parted, and my dreaming soul  
On Fancy's pinions forward flew  
O'er five short years, and reached the goal  
That love and hope had kept in view.  
Oh, joyous day! a merry throng  
Were gathered on the Clachan green;  
The villagers, with dance and song,  
Held jubilee; that happy scene  
Is treasured in my memory still.  
I hold again that little hand;  
I hear the whispered word, 'I will!'  
I lead her through that cheerful band,  
While Donald Beg, and Fergus Mohr,  
And Angus Dhu — the pipers three —  
Strike up, while marching on before,  
The pibroch of M'Gillviray.

Oh! how the wild notes brought a flood  
Of mem'ries bright and glories gone,  
When, for the Royal Stuart blood.  
Our chief led great Clan Chattan on  
To famed Culloden's field: — 'Tis past,  
That marriage scene with all its charms  
And winter comes with freezing blast,  
To find my young wife in my arms,  
And all the villagers in tears  
Assembled round us — she was gone;  
The prize was mine a few short years,  
And I was now alone, alone.

Oh! what had I to live for then?  
One clasp, one look, one fond caress,  
And flying far from each proud Ben,  
With sorrow deep as dark Loch Ness,  
I left my humble Highland home,  
To gaze on Monagh Leagh no more.  
With blighted heart I crossed the foam  
And landed on New Zealand's shore;  
You know the rest——”

“But what has all  
This home-sick dreaming got to do  
With death, my friend?”  
“I've got a call  
To meet my Elsie.”  
“Nonsense, Hugh!”  
I laughed, but still his brow was sad;  
“Cheer up and chase this gloom away,  
There's pleasure yet in life, my lad.”

“I tell you we must part to-day;  
I have not told you all that passed  
Before me in my dreaming hours.  
This day, with you, shall be my last.  
True friendship, Dick, has long been ours.  
And we must part in love, my friend, —  
You smile again — well, time will prove  
My premonition true; — The end  
Is drawing nigh; — Behold my love,  
My life, my Elsie, on you hill, —  
Ay, yonder hill is Monagh Leagh —

Just listen, friend, she's calling still,  
And still the dear one beckons me  
Away — the sun upon the peaks  
Is blushing crimson o'er the snow.  
Behold! how bright its rays and streaks  
Are dancing on Loch Ness below;  
Rich violet and purple clouds  
A tabernacle form on high,  
Behind whose folds the starry crowds  
Lie hidden in the silent sky —  
'Tis there, 'tis there, the same fond face,  
Which, but a few short hours ago,  
Pressed close to mine; just in this place  
My Elsie stood, and, bending low,  
She whispered in an icy breath,  
'Oh! Hugh, behold thy spirit-bride.  
I'm here for thee; prepare for death.  
Thy soul to-morrow, by my side,  
Shall trace the scenes we loved of yore.  
Again, my Hugh, my husband brave,  
We'll watch the Highland eagle soar;  
We'll see the heath and bracken wave.  
Ah! Hugh, the spirit-sight is keen;  
We cross the ocean with a glance;  
We know not time — ' She left the scene,  
And I awakened from my trance;  
But let us change the subject, mate;  
Let's have a smoke; — Hark! there's a shot —  
One, two, three, four! we mustn't wait —  
Where are our rifles? Ah! we've got  
The darkies now. See, see, they dance  
Before our eyes; hear how they yell!  
There goes the order for advance —  
There's Norman out and Percival."

M'Gillviray ceased, and we ran to the door,  
Prepared to advance where our officers led;  
Both Hill and O'Beirne were well to the fore,  
While Norman and Percival rushed on ahead.  
Flash! flash! went our rifles; we followed their track,  
And in through a gap in the timber we broke;  
We loaded again, and they answered us back —

The rebels, I mean — as they plunged through the smoke.  
“Now, back to the camp, lads; we've scattered the swine;  
They've tasted enough of our metal to-day!”  
Twas Percival spoke, and we fell into line,  
And back through the break in the bush took our way.  
We reached but the centre, when out from the bush  
That skirted each side with its branches and logs  
The Maoris in crowds, with a yell and a rush,  
Encompassed us: — “Boys, give the treacherous dogs  
A taste of our true British pluck!” — a wild cry,  
As a tomahawk's stroke cut the sentence in twain,  
Went in through the woodlands and up to the sky,  
And Percival lay in the front of the slain.  
Oh, God! in my ears still rings yell after yell.  
I see the bright tomahawks dripping with blood;  
The wild demons looked as if painted in hell;  
They leaped through the thicket and burst from the wood.  
Outflanked and outnumbered, our officers dead,  
A handful of men in the grasp of the foe,  
What could we have done in such stress? so we fled  
When Norman and Wheeler and Hill were laid low.  
We reached the old church, but the savages stay'd  
To butcher the wounded and mangle the slain;  
They vanished ere night in the forest's dark shade,  
To steer their canoes o'er Waikato again.  
At daybreak we went to the scene of the fray,  
To bury our comrades and bid them adieu,  
And near a small mound where five savages lay  
We found brave M'Gillviray sleeping there too.  
Five warrior chiefs proved the work he had done;  
They fell by his hand ere his soul went to God;  
He smiled in the face of the bright morning sun  
That shone on the purple streaks o'er the green sod.  
I planted a wattle to mark where he sleeps —  
I wonder where is it? — Ah, there stands the tree!  
By Jove, it's in blossom, too! See how it weeps  
Rich tears of bright gold o'er the hillock where he  
Is resting in peace. Is he dreaming there still  
Of Elsie, his bride, and his dear Highland glen?  
This life is a puzzle, Jack; fight as we will,  
We're nothing at last but the shadows of men.  
The substance soon blends with the blossoms and weeds

That spring to the surface; and as for the soul.  
Perhaps it may flourish or fade in its deeds,  
Or find in some other bright planet its goal.

Thomas Bracken

# Not Understood

Not understood, we move along asunder;  
Our paths grow wider as the seasons creep  
Along the years; we marvel and we wonder  
Why life is life, and then we fall asleep  
Not understood.

Not understood, we gather false impressions  
And hug them closer as the years go by;  
Till virtues often seem to us transgressions;  
And thus men rise and fall, and live and die  
Not understood.

Not understood! Poor souls with stunted vision  
Oft measure giants with their narrow gauge;  
The poisoned shafts of falsehood and derision  
Are oft impelled 'gainst those who mould the age,  
Not understood.

Not understood! The secret springs of action  
Which lie beneath the surface and the show,  
Are disregarded; with self-satisfaction  
We judge our neighbours, and they often go  
Not understood.

Not understood! How trifles often change us!  
The thoughtless sentence and the fancied slight  
Destroy long years of friendship, and estrange us,  
And on our souls there falls a freezing blight;  
Not understood.

Not understood! How many breasts are aching  
For lack of sympathy! Ah! day by day  
How many cheerless, lonely hearts are breaking!  
How many noble spirits pass away,  
Not understood.

O God! that men would see a little clearer,  
Or judge less harshly where they cannot see!  
O God! that men would draw a little nearer

To one another, -- they'd be nearer Thee,  
And understood.

Thomas Bracken

# Pax Vobiscum

IN a forest, far away,  
One small creeklet, day by day,  
Murmurs only this sad lay:  
'Peace be with thee, Lilian.'

One old box-tree bends his head,  
One broad wattle shades her bed,  
One lone magpie mourns the dead:  
'Peace be with thee, Lilian.'

Echoes come on every breeze,  
Sighing through the ancient trees,  
Whisp'ring in their melodies:  
'Peace be with thee, Lilian.'

Mellow sunbeams, morn and eve,  
Quick to come and slow to leave,  
Kiss the quilt where daisies weave  
Rich designs o'er Lilian.

When the dying blossoms cling  
To the skirts of parting Spring,  
Wattle-boughs and branches fling  
Showers of gold o'er Lilian.

When the Summer moon mounts high,  
Queen of all the speckless sky,  
Shafts of silver softly lie  
O'er the grave of Lilian.

Mystic midnight voices melt  
Through each leafy bower and belt,  
Round the spot where friends have knelt—  
'Peace be with thee, Lilian.'

Far away from town and tower,  
Sleeping in a leafy bower,  
Withered lies the forest flower—  
'Peace be with thee, Lilian.'

There, where passions ne'er intrude,  
There, where Nature has imbued  
With her sweets the solitude,  
Rests the form of Lilian.

Dear old forest o'er the sea,  
Home of Nature's euphony,  
Pour thy requiem psalmody  
O'er the grave of Lilian.

Guard that daisy-quilted sod:  
Thou hast there no common clod;  
Keep her ashes safe; for God  
Makes but few like Lilian.

Sceptics ask me: 'Is that clay  
In the forest far away  
Part of her?'—I only say:  
'Flow'rets breathe out Lilian;

'From her grave their sweets mount high—  
Love and beauty never die—  
Sun and stars, earth, sea and sky  
All partake of Lilian.

Thomas Bracken

# Spirit Of Song

Where is thy dwelling-place? Echo of sweetness,  
Seraph of tenderness, where is thy home?  
Angel of happiness, herald of fleetness,  
Thou hast the key of the star-blazon'd dome.  
Where lays that never end  
Up to God's throne ascend,  
And our fond heart-wishes lovingly throng,  
Soaring with thee above,  
Bearer of truth and love,  
Teacher of heaven's tongue - Spirit of Song!

Euphony, born in the realms of the tearless,  
Mingling thy notes with the voices of Earth;  
Wanting thee, all would be dreary and cheerless,  
Weaver of harmony, giver of mirth.  
Comfort of child and sage,  
With us in youth and age,  
Soothing the weak and inspiring the strong,  
Illuming the blackest night,  
Making the day more bright,  
Oh! thou art dear to us, Spirit of Song!

Oft in the springtime, sweet words of affection  
Are whispered by thee in thy tenderest tone,  
And in the winter dark clouds of dejection  
By thee are dispelled till all sorrow has flown.  
Thou'rt with the zephyrs low,  
And with the brooklet's flow,  
And with the feathered choir all the year long;  
Happy each child of thine,  
Blest with thy gifts divine,  
Charming our senses, sweet Spirit of Song!

Thomas Bracken