

Classic Poetry Series

Tom McInnes
- poems -

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Tom McInnes(29 October 1867 — 11 February 1951)

Thomas Robert Edward MacInnes (né McInnes) (October 29, 1867 — February 11, 1951) was a Canadian poet and writer whose writings ranged from "vigorous, slangy recollections of the Yukon gold rush" (*Lonesome Bar*, 1909) to "a translation of and commentary on Lao-tzu's philosophy" (*The Teaching of the Old Boy*, 1927). His narrative verse was highly popular in his lifetime.

Life

He was born Thomas Robert Edward McInnes in Dresden, Ontario. He moved to New Westminster with his family in 1874, and grew up there. His father, Thomas Robert McInnes, served in the Canadian Senate from 1881 to 1897, and as Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia from 1897 until 1900. Tom MacInnes was educated at University College, Toronto, graduating with a B.A. from the University of Toronto in 1887. Tom MacInnes studied law at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, Ontario, and was called to the bar in 1893. McInnes served as secretary to the Bering Sea Claims Commission in 1896 and 1897, and for part of 1897 was a member of the Yukon special police and customs force at Skagway. He acted as private secretary to his father, the Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia, from 1898 until 1900 (when the elder McInnes was dismissed from the office). He was still spelling his surname "McInnes" as of 1916. MacInnes spent long periods in China, where he had business interests, between 1916 and 1927. One source says that he "returned to Canada with a lifelong hatred of Communists and Chinese."

MacInnes wrote a series of articles on his Chinese experiences, published in 1926 in the *Vancouver Morning Star* and *Vancouver Province*, that became the basis of his 1927 book, *Oriental Occupation of British Columbia*. According to more than one source, the book proposes that British Columbia adopt apartheid-like policies in dealing with what MacInnes perceived to be an undesirable influx of Chinese immigrants. Another source, though, calls *Oriental Occupation*... "a pamphlet," says that MacInnes had "developed a sympathy for Orientals living in British Columbia," and says that the pamphlet reflects his "views of British Columbia prejudice" against Orientals. In Vancouver, MacInnes joined the Canadian Union of became a leading activist in the fascist scene, founding the Nationalist League of Canada.

Writing

MacInnes's poetry was highly popular in Canada in the first half of the 20th century. He wrote "light, easy verse that dismissed smugness and respectability with unconcerned humour ... an amused detachment underlies his work, as

though poetry were merely one form of expression, as good as any other." He believed "that joy and delight, rather than the prevalent melancholic outpourings of the soul, were essential to poetry." MacInnes can be compared to Robert Service, not least in the fact of their popularity in Canada at the time. Like Service in his Yukon and war poems, MacInnes, "was especially interested in examining man within a natural landscape, on the fringes of society." Also like Service, "his rhythms are often forced and pedantic, his rhyme-schemes careless and rough. "In some ways MacInnes seems to have modeled his career on that of Service. His first published work, *A Romance of the Lost* (1908), is a long yarn in rhyme about the Klondike Gold Rush, in the manner of the poems in Service's 1907 breakthrough work, *Songs of a Sourdough*. In 1913 MacInnes released *Rhymes of a Rounder*, on the heels of Service's 1912 *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone*. Unlike Service, though, MacInnes "was intrigued with elaborate poetic forms, such as the villanelle," and actually invented "a five-line stanza of his own he called the 'mirelle'."

Katherine Hale, reviewing MacInnes's first book in *The Mail and Empire*, pronounced that "the best poem is 'The Damozel of Doom,' an eerie, dreamlike, passionate piece, suggested by the teaching of old Tao, who believed that there are regions where dead souls may be awakened by desires so strong that they are drawn outward again to Earth, where, through finer desires, they again pass into Paradise. Then 'the peace of a thousand years may be theirs in Limbo'.... The coming of this desire, which shall ultimately free, or banish the soul to ages of 'utter vanishment' is depicted in 'The Damozel of Doom' – a poem worthy of the genius of Poe."

John Garvin included three MacInnes poems, including "The Damozel of Doom," in his 1916 anthology *Canadian Poets*, and wrote of MacInnes's poetry: "Originality, constructive imagination, felicitous fancy, and delightful humour (if sometimes grim), combined with philosophic subtlety, much experience of life, and skilled artistry, are the outstanding qualities of this poet, so little known to Canadian readers, so worthy of their appreciation." In a 1933 talk, on Canadian poets who had become known in the early 20th century, Charles G.D. Roberts said: "Preeminent among these is Tom MacInnes, standing somewhat apart from the stream of our poetry, and tracing the inheritance of his very individual talent to Francois Villon and Edgar Alan Poe, with an occasional dash of Keats."

From 'Lonesome Bar'

YET oft, to hear the echoes ring and stir
That vacant valley like a dulcimer,
I flung her name against the naked hills,
And crimsoned all the air with thoughts of her.

Tom McInnes

Illumined

I WOKE in the Land of Night,
With a dream of Day at my heart;
Its golden outlines vanished,
But its charm would not depart;

Like music still remaining,
But its meaning—no man can say
In the Land of Night where they know not
Of Day, nor the things of Day.

I dwelt in the chiefest city
Of all the Land of Night;
Where the fires burn ever brighter
That give the people light;
Where the sky above is darkened,
And never a star is seen,
And they think it but children's fancy
That ever a star hath been.

But out from that city early
I fled by a doubtful way;
And faltering oft and lonely
I sought my dream of Day;
Till I came at last to a Mountain
That rose exceeding high,
And I thought I saw on its summit
A glint as of dawn from the sky.

'Twas midway on that Mountain
That I found an altar-stone,
Deep-cut with runes forgotten,
And symbols little known;
And scarce could I read the meaning
Of the legends carven there,
But I lay me out on that altar,
Breathing an ancient prayer:

'By the God of the timeless Sky,

O Saint of the Altar, say
What gift hast thou for me?
For I have dreamed of Day:
But I seek nor gift nor power,
I pray for naught but light;
And only for light to lead me
Out of the Land of Night!

Long I lay on that altar,
Up-gazing fearfully
Through the awful cold and darkness
That now encompassed me;
Till it seemed as I were lying drowned
Under a lifeless sea.

There shone as a pale blue Star,
Intangible—serene—
And I saw a spark from it fall
As it were a crystal keen;
And it flashed as it fell and pierced
My temples white and cold;
Then round that altar-stone once more
The awful darkness rolled.

But there was light on my brow,
And a calm that steeled me through,
And I was strong with a strength
That never before I knew;
With a strength for the trackless heights,
And scorn of the world below—
But I rose not up from that altar-stone,
I would not leave it so.

'O Saint of the Altar, say
How may this light redeem?
For though on my brow like a jewel
Its Star hath left a gleam,
O Saint, 'tis a light too cold and cruel
To be the light of my dream!'

Anon 'twas a crimson Star
That over the Altar shone,

And there sank as a rose of flame
To my heart ere the Star was gone;
And out from the flames thereof
A subtle fragrance then
Went stealing down the mountain-side
O'er the lowly ways of men.

The Star was gone, but it brought
To light in its crimson glow
The lovely things forgotten
I dreamed of long ago;
And gladly then I had given
My life to all below;
Yet I rose not up from the altar-stone,
I would not leave it so.

And at last was a golden Star;
But I scarce know how nor where;
For it melted all around me,
And the other Stars were there;
And all in one blissful moment
The light of Day had come;
Then I reeled away from that altar-stone,
Old, and blind, and dumb.

I dwell again in the city,
I seek no more for light;
But I go on a mission of silence
To those who would leave the Night;
And for this—and this thing only,
Through the evil streets I stray;
I who am free to the timeless Sky
Illumined forever with Day.

Tom McInnes

The Damozel Of Doom

THAT dream came not again to me,
Nor any dream at all;
But well I knew, as the days went past,
There held me fast in thrall
A something of that shrouded thing
That wrapped me like a pall.

An aura drear that severed me
From men and the ways of men;
As some great evil I had done
My friends did shun me then;
I felt accurst, and kept apart,
And sought them not again.

But O how chill the World did grow!
And the Sun, as a thing unreal,
Did glare and glare through the vacant day,
And never a ray I'd feel
To warm my blood, the light fell thin
And gray as spectral steel.

A pale disease took hold on me,
And when the night would come
I had no rest, but sleepless lay
As stark as clay, and numb;
And could not stir till dawn would break
Nor gasp, for I was dumb.

And yet were times all faintly tinged
With a glimmering ecstasy;
Moments that lingered in their flight,
Trailing a light to me
Elusive and wan as the phosphor foam
That floats on the midnight sea.

And out of my stricken body then
My soul would seem to creep,
And over a sheer unfathomed brink
Of silence sink asleep,

Beyond the shadow and sound of dreams,
And deeper than Earth is deep.

Yet ever from those slumber spells,
That seemed like years, I'd start
Sudden awake, bewildered by
A presence nigh my heart,
As if a soul had stirred in me
That of me was no part.

And so three seasons passed away,
And the early summer came;
And still that weird fantasy
Enshrouded me the same;
But now it seemed as luminous
With some alchemic flame.

At length in a garden wide and old,
A garden all my own,
One afternoon I lay at ease
Under the trees alone,
While the fragrant day fell off in the West
Like a Titan rose o'erblown.

And lying there I dreamed once more,
And it seemed that a scarlet bird
Flew out of my heart with a joyous cry,
To the topmost sky, and I heard
Her song come echoing down to me,
Yearning word on word:

'Slow-slow!
O moments-O ages slow!
But love shall be my own again-
Be it moments or ages slow!'

Tom McInnes

Underground

ON a queer, queer journey
I heard the queerest sound,—
'Twas the Devil with a banjo
In a cavern underground,
Where the merry, merry skeletons
Were waltzing round and round,
While the clicking of their bones kept time.

Through a low, iron door,
With a huge iron bar,
A door perchance some careless
Imp had left ajar,

I crept behind a column cut
All out of Iceland spar,
And the carven angles twinkled frostily.

I was frightened of the Devil,
And I wouldn't look at him,
But I watched a thousand goblins
From nook and cranny dim
A-glowing on the skeletons,
And every goblin grim
And ugly as an old gargoyle.

And bogles played on fiddles
To help the banjo out,
For 'twas nothing but the music
Kept alive that crazy rout;
But the big green toads could
Only hop about
To the rumbling of the bass bassoon.

Behind the Iceland column
I watched them on the sly,
Above them arched the cavern
With its roof miles high,
All ribbed with blue rock-crystal, shining

Bluer than the sky,
And studded with enormous stalactites.

But the lovely floor below,
With its level crystalline
Splendid surface spreading
Radiantly green!-
As if a lone, impearlèd lake
Of waters subterrene
Had frozen to a flawless emerald!

And down, down, down,
Its moveless depths were clear;
And down, down, down,
In wonder I did peer
At lost and lovely imagery
Beneath me far and near,-
Silent there and white forevermore.

But from the sunken beauty
Of that white imagery
Lissome shadows loosened
Flame-like and fitfully,
That formed anon to spheres serene
And mounted airily
And broke in golden bubbles through the floor.

There, bubble-like, they vanished
Amid the whirling crew,
Yet left a radiance trailing
Slowly out of view,
That sometimes o'er the skeletons
Such carnal glamour threw,
It flattered them to human shape again.

How long I watched I know not;
The weird hours went on,
Lost hours that bring the midnight
No nearer to the dawn,
When suddenly I felt a clutch,
And swiftly I was drawn
From out behind that carven block of spar.

My soul!—a skeleton!—
A rattling little thing,
Twined itself about me
As close as it could cling!
And in its arms with horror I
Perforce 'gan circling
Compelled by that fantastic orchestra.

Onward swept the waltzers
To the wicked tunes they played,
And soon we were amongst them,
And my rattling partner swayed
Whene'er the golden bubbles broke,
And trailing lights arrayed
Elusively around its naked bones.

A minute or an hour,—
Or maybe half a night,—

No matter, for at last
I was over all my fright,
And the music rippled through me till
I shivered with delight,
Fascinated like the fat green toads.

And by and by I noticed
How 'mid that grisly swarm
My clinging little partner
'Gan strangely to transform,—
I saw the bones as through a mist
Of something pink and warm,
That quivered and grew firm from top to toe.

Bright copper-coloured hair
Soon round her did curl,
Her mouth grew sweet with tints
Of coral and of pearl,
And she looked on me with eyes that seemed
Of lambent chrysoberyl,
While her body fair as alabaster shone.

A witch she was so lovely,
To all else I was blind,
And the Devil and the Goblins
And the Rout we left behind,
In our wild waltz whirling on
The cool sweet wind
Of the lone lorn caverns underground.

Like rose-leaves strewn
Upon a crystal tide,
Like thistle-down blown
By Zephyrs far and wide,
We swept in aimless ecstasy,
Silent side by side,
Careening through those caverns underground.

A minute or an hour,–
Or maybe half a night,–
No way have I to measure
The madness of that flight,

For the loosened zone of witchery
Made drunk with sheer delight,
Till we sank in happy stupor to the floor.

Nearby there was a grotto
That opened chapel-wise,
As from a rich cathedral,
In sacrilegious guise;
On the high Masonic altar were
Three crystal chalices,
And they held the sweetest poisons Hell can brew.

One was a liquor golden
That sparkled like the dew,
One was a wine that trembled,
And blood-red was its hue,
But the last Lethean elixir
Was dark as night, shot through
With glimmerings of green and violet.

Then rose the witch and muttered,
 'Quick, for the hour is late!
Quick ere the music ceases
 And the locks of the dungeons grate
O'er the host of haunted skeletons
 That here brief revel make!
Come free me by this altar's alchemy!

'Drink thou the golden liquor
 That lights yon jewelled rim,-
That sparkles fair as sunshine
 On curls of seraphim!
Drink for the love I gave thee!
 Or drink for a devil's whim!
But pledge me to the time that yet shall be!

'But the gloomy elixir
 Give me, that I may sleep
With the white wraiths that slumber
 In the dim green deep!
Where the silence of the under-world
 Shall wrap me round and keep
My soul untouched by any dreams of day!'

I drank the cup of sunshine,
 She drank the cup of night,
But the red we spilled between us
 For sacrifice and plight
Of passion that must centre in
 The sphereless Infinite
Ere her sweet life shall mix with mine again.

A moment all her beauty
 Was lightened as with fire,
Her fair voluptuous body
 With its trailing, loose attire,
And her eyes to mine did glow as in
 A sunset of desire,-
Then prone she fell upon the chapel floor.

And the white flesh wasted from her

As she was falling dead,
Her very bones had crumbled,
Ere one farewell I said,-
From sight of that dire sorcery
In wild dismay I fled,
Seeking madly for the low iron door.

Behind the Iceland column
I found it still ajar,-
Through galleries of darkness
I travelled swift and far,
Until I reached the upper-world
And saw the morning star
Paling o'er a meadow by the sea.

Tom McInnes