

Classic Poetry Series

Vance Palmer
- poems -

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Vance Palmer(1885 - 1959)

Edward Vivian (Vance) Palmer was born in Bundaberg, Queensland, on 28 August 1885, the son of Henry Burnet Palmer, a school master with literary leanings and literary friendships. His youth was spent in a succession of country towns between Bundaberg and Stanthorpe. In 1899 he went as a boarder to the Ipswich Boys' Grammar School where he remained until December 1901.

In 1905 Vance went to London where he worked as a freelance journalist. After three years he made the return journey via Finland and Russia. Back in Australia he worked for some time as tutor and bookkeeper on a cattle station in the Maranoa district of Queensland. On his second visit to London in 1910, Vance met many noted literary figures, and this association - in particular with the editor of the *New Age*, A.R. Orage - influenced his later social and political opinions. Orage's magazine carried much of the contemporary radical, socialist, and Fabian social comment, and back in Australia, Vance gravitated to groups of a similar persuasion. He became closely allied to the Victorian Socialist Party, and was a member of the Y Club, a discussion group formed in 1918 for those with socialist inclinations.

Vance was married in London on 23 May 1914 to Janet (Nettie) Higgins. This was the beginning of the most famous partnership in Australian literary history, and, for Vance, it was a personal relationship from which he was to draw steady strength for the rest of his life.

When war broke out in 1915 the Palmers were in Brittany. Nettie had been teaching and studying and Vance was writing. They returned to Australia in September 1915. Before leaving England they had both published two books. Vance enlisted in the Fourteenth Battalion, A.I.F.. He was sent overseas, but the Armistice had been signed when he arrived in Europe.

After the war he lived for a time in Melbourne. In 1925 he and Nettie, with their two young daughters, went to Caloundra on the Queensland coast for a holiday. They remained there for four years. Nettie assumed the responsibility of providing for the family and wrote thousands of words every week for papers around Australia. This left Vance free to concentrate solely on his creative writings. During this period Vance drafted the small group of novels which were to establish his reputation - *The man Hamilton* (1928), *Men are human* (1930), *Daybreak* (1932) and *The Swayne family* (1934).

The Palmers went to London in 1935. By mid-1936 they had moved to Spain

where Vance worked on *Such is life* and *Legend for Sanderson*. They left the country after the outbreak of civil war later the same year. Aileen remained as an interpreter with the Republican forces. The Palmers were deeply involved with the war and on their return to Australia endeavoured to awaken the people to the issues being fought on the other side of the world. Through his life-time Vance was vitally interested in world events and was concerned with the apathetic attitude of the average Australian to such matters.

Another decade had passed before Vance was to publish another novel. In 1947 he wrote *Cyclone* and the next year the first volume of a trilogy *Golconda* appeared. The second volume, *Seedtime*, was published in 1957, followed two years later by *The big fellow*.

Vance had an active interest in the theatre. In 1922 and 1923 both he and Nettie had been intimately connected with the Pioneer Players, a group of amateur actors organised by Louis Esson and Dr Stewart Macky with the express intention of fostering and producing native Australian drama. Vance was later to write a history of the Players in his book *Louis Esson and the Australian theatre* (1948). He was also a dramatist in his own right. *The black horse* and other plays was published in 1924 and *Hail tomorrow*, a full length four act play, in 1947.

Vance Palmer was one of Australia's leading literary critics. He contributed review articles to newspapers and literary magazines and also wrote several books in which he sought to delineate the nature of the Australian social and cultural tradition. In 1940 *National portraits* appeared, to be followed in 1941 by *A.G. Stephens: his life and work*, *Frank Wilmot* (1942), *Old Australian bush ballads* (with Margaret Sutherland) in 1951 and *The legend of the nineties* in 1954.

From 1940 onwards Vance was heard regularly over the national network of the A.B.C. He talked on a wide variety of literary matters, and it was his review programme 'Current Books Worth Reading' to which he largely owed his reputation as one of the foremost and reliable critics in Australia.

In 1942 he was appointed to a position on the Advisory Board of the Commonwealth Literary Fund. Five years later he became chairman of the Board. Vance enjoyed considerable prestige among Australian writers at this time, and he was chosen as their representative at the Writers' Conference in New Zealand in 1951.

Vance continued on write and to lecture in spite of persistent illness in his later years. He died unexpectedly at his home in Kew, Melbourne, on 15 July 1959.

As a writer Vance Palmer held a prominent position in the Australian radical-nationalistic tradition which began with the Bulletin and included such writers as Bernard O'Dowd, Louis Esson, Katharine Susannah Prichard, E.J. Brady, and Alan Marshall. T. Inglis Moore gives Palmer particular credit in this tradition in being able to accept the realities of the Australian scene naturally and unconsciously.

Song Of The Old Boundary Rider

Fat and full of health are the valleys of the Condamine,
There the yellow maize and the green tobacco grow,
Through the little gardens runs the trailing passion-vine,
And softly to the North the white downs flow.

Here nothing changes, seed-time or harvest-time,
Mulga on the skyline, mulga round the place,
Riding round the fences I hear the bells of bullocks chime,
But homely sounds come rarer than a woman's face.

Lonely is the day and lonely is the firelight,
Lonely is the heart when the trees come creeping near,
When the bobcock calls the very dogs are dumb with fright,
And when a voice starts singing it's my own voice that I hear.

Back let me ride to the valley of the Condamine,
There the little homesteads nestle in their green,
Opal where the mists rise, amber where the paddocks shine,
My own things round me and none to come between.

Vance Palmer

The Farmer Remembers The Somme

Will they never fade or pass!
The mud, and the misty figures endlessly coming
In file through the foul morass,
And the grey flood-water ripping the reeds and grass,
And the steel wings drumming.

The hills are bright in the sun:
There's nothing changed or marred in the well-known places;
When work for the day is done
There's talk, and quiet laughter, and gleams of fun
On the old folks' faces.

I have returned to these:
The farm, and the kindly Bush, and the young calves lowing;
But all that my mind sees
Is a quaking bog in a mist - stark, snapped trees,
And the dark Somme flowing.

Vance Palmer

The Pathfinders

Night, and a bitter sky, and strange birds crying,
The wan trees whisper and the winds make moan,
Here where in ultimate peace their bones are lying
In gaunt waste places that they made their own,
Beyond the ploughed lands where the corn is sown.

Death, and untrodden ways, and night before them,
From sheltering homes and friendly hearths they came;
Far from the mouldering dust of those that bore them
They rest in silence now and know no fame,
No proud stone speaks, no waters lip the name.

Brave and undaunted hearts, eyes lit with laughter,
Minds that outran the ancient doubts and fears,
They blazed the track for legions following after,
And bared new treasure to the hungry years,
Till spent with strife they sank amongst the spears.

Slow sinks the glowing flame and fades the ember,
No bright star flickers and the woods are stark,
But still our children's children will remember
The swift forerunners, bearers of the ark,
Who lit the beacons in the uncharted dark.

Rich towns shall flourish on the hills that hold them,
Bright dreams shall quicken from their wandering dust,
And till the end our reverent minds shall fold them
In storied chambers free from moth and rust:
The fealty pledged, the kingdom given in trust.

Vance Palmer

The Road To Roma Jail

It's a long road, a cruel road, the road to Roma Jail,
birds in all the branches mocking as you pass,
the spiteful little soldier-bird, the stupid old jackass,
crying 'One, two three of them; riding head to tail'.
On the long road, the cruel road, the road to Roma Jail.

Crookedly the track runs beneath the grassy skies
silver shines the mulga, golden glows the plain,
Bullocks in the barley-grass start and stare again,
stockmen at the station-yards, watch the white dust rise,
but one man, jogging on, dare not raise his eyes.

Pride of life and wild blood, all must pay the toll,
stolen horses' mouths are hard as misers hearts
none knew where the end is once the journey starts,
and Steve rides a long ride to reach a bitter goal
where black imps, grinning imps, hover round his soul.

It's a long road, a cruel road the road to roma Jail,
a trooper rides behind you, a tracker rides before,
your hands are tied, your head bowed, your heart and body sore,
and high above you in the blue the homing wood-duck sail,
on the long road, the cruel road, the road to Roma Jail

Vance Palmer

Youth And Age

Youth that rides the wildest horse,
Youth that throws the deadliest steer,
Spending strength without remorse,
Grappling with the ghosts of fear,
Knows it only holds to-day
All it freely flings away.

Youth that rides a race with Death
When the frightened cattle break,
Living in the moment's breath,
Risking all for honour's sake,
Lightly knows it holds in fee
Life and immortality.

Age that rides the spavined grey,
Age that seeks the safest track,
Scenting perils by the way,
Dreaming of the journey back,
Leaves behind it all the truth
Known to the wild heart of youth.

Vance Palmer