



## Our Poets and Our Bush

(By W.I.G.)

The first poets of any degree of importance that Australia fostered came into the country on the currents of the gold-rush; and it is not without significance that most of them were not Australian-born.

Marcus Clarke and George Evans were Londoners, Arthur Adams a New Zealander, Victor Daley an Irishman, James Brunton Stephens a Scot, Adam Lindsay Gordon, from the Azores, Kendall, Henry Lawson, and A. B. Paterson were indeed Australian-born, but of parents newly come from other lands.

It would seem that it requires more than one generation before there can be born that love of country which nothing on earth can supplant, before the sights and scenes of a country can become so interwoven with memories, so much a part of the deepest part of being as to awaken a perception of their beauty as a perfect beauty satisfying and complete.

It was not possible for our first poets to feel thus about Nature in Australia. Even when their emotions are most stirred by some Australian scene, they are also conscious that it fails to be as their own real home-land; another country has their true allegiance; therefore, inevitably, the new land is inferior, or is even terrible in its strangeness. "The love of field and coppice, of green and shaded lanes, of ordered woods and gardens," blinds the eyes not only of the exile, but of the exile's son.

Stevenson, in fair Samoa, thinks wistfully of the bleak and barren "hills of home." Such tenacity of emotion is not lightly evoked; and if Australians of to-day have at last realised their "filial bond to nature" it is all the more necessary to understand why the best of our earliest poets have felt so strangely unfilial.

For these poets were indeed "strangers in a strange land," and that fact has coloured the whole of their attitude towards Nature in Australia.

Arthur Adams thus interprets the "voiceless yearnings" of these exiles, persisting even beyond death:

*"But in their sleep, like troubled children turning,  
A dream of mother country in them burning,  
They whisper their despair,  
And one vague, voiceless yearning  
Burdens the pulsing air—  
'Unchanging here the drab year onwards presses;  
No Spring comes trysting here with new loosed tresses,  
...  
And we would lie 'neath old-remembered beeches,  
While close about us reaches  
The cool, grey-lichened wall."*

When feelings such as these were natural, in fact almost inevitable, it is no longer strange that their attitude towards Nature was such as the following passages reveal:—

*"In lands where bright blossoms are scentless  
And songless bright birds;  
(Adam Lindsay Gordon). Gray rocks grinned under ridges bare  
Like dry teeth in a mouldered skull;  
And ghastly gum-trees trunks did loom  
Out of black clefts and rifts of gloom  
As sheeted spectres that arise  
From yawning graves at dead of night.  
Red gums, with outstretched bloody hands  
Shook maledictions in the air.  
(Victor Daley)*

*Bitter beneath a bitter sky,  
To Nature he has no reply.  
Wanton, perhaps, and cruel. Yes.  
Is not his sun more merciless?  
Joy has such niggard dole to give,  
He laughs, a child, just glad to live.  
So drab and neutral is his day  
He gleams a splendour in the gray.  
(Arthur Adams).*

*Though tender grace the landscape lacks,  
too spacious  
Impassive, silent, lonely, to be fair. . .*

*Thus in her likeness that strange Nature  
Moulding  
Makes man as moody, sad and savage too.  
(Thomas Heney).*

*Where thin and slow, Campaspe coils  
Athwart the burnt Australian plain.  
The white flame leaps, the billy boils,  
And tongues are free and fain—  
But o'er the mopoke's dread refrain  
As sheer the Southern night slips down  
The city's call swells clear again—  
I love the lights of London town!  
(Archibald Strong.)*

Nature in Australia could give them no joy; it is this absence of joy that makes their poetry so unsatisfactory to many Australians now.

Since they lived and wrote, new generations have come into being; the Great War has crystallised vague sentiments into a strong national feeling; and in consequence, there now exist in most Australians a perception of the beauty of Australia, and an emotional response to that beauty.

In art, if not yet in literature, this has already found expression, as the paintings of Heysen and others testify. Browning has said *"We're so made that we love first when we see them painted things we have passed perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see"*; and the new appreciative attitude in Art must quicken the coming of that attitude in literature.

George Essex Evans long ago expressed the need for a change of spirit; for the danger is that what was an expression of a real feeling in our first poets may become a dead convention in their successors.

*"Is this her song, so weirdly strange,  
That wheresoe'er her poets range  
Is heard the strain?  
Broods there no spell upon the air  
But desolation and despair?  
No voice, save Sorrow's, to intrude  
Upon her mountain solitude  
Or sun-kissed plain?  
These have their message; yet from these  
Our songs have thrown  
O'er Austral hills and leas  
One sombre tone.*

*Shall they inspire no nobler strain  
Than songs of bitterness and pain?  
Strike her wild harp with firmer hand,  
And send her music thro' the land  
With loftier tone!  
O for a sonorous voice and strong  
To change that silence into song.  
To give that melody release  
Which sleeps in the deep heart of peace  
With folded wings!"  
(George Essex Evans.)*

Here and there, the new and joyous song is beginning to be heard. The best example is Dorothea Mackellar's "My Country," which is, I suppose, the most popular Australian poem in our land. Its very popularity is a proof that the feelings it enshrines find their echo in the nation's heart.

*Core of my heart, my country!  
Land of the Rainbow Gold,  
For flood and fire and famine,  
She pays us back three-fold.  
Over the thirsty paddocks,  
Watch, after many days,  
The filmy veil of greenness  
That thickens as we gaze.  
An opal-hearted country,  
A wilful, lavish land—  
All you who have not loved her,  
You will not understand—  
Though earth holds many splendours,  
Wherever I may die,  
I know to what brown country  
My homing thoughts will fly.*

In poetry such as this, we see the dawn of a day when our poets, no longer oppressed by the exile's heart-ache, shall be free to interpret in song the joy and the beauty of Nature in Australia to a responsive people.