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Aussie

# THE AUSSIE WOMAN

This Section, written by Women, is devoted to things about Women that should be known by Men, and things about Men that should be known by Women.

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN POETS

By EVE'S DAUGHTER.

I—MARY GILMORE.

Poetry, as a word, has become as over-worked as the word camouflage, and few people when they speak of poetry ever stop to reason whether that of which they are speaking is poetry or verse. Perhaps it is not really necessary to reason, for even bad verse may become good poetry. To thousands, Ella Wheeler Wilcox is probably the greatest poet who ever lived. The soul



Mary Gilmore

along the way has little or no ability to understand the thoughts and wisdom of the great gods, so even the humblest singer has his worth, provided he keeps free of humbug and is always sincere.

Primarily, poetry is a surge and out-pouring of emotion, and if that were all every person who rhymes would be a poet. Yet there are other factors of imagination, style, thought, beauty, virility, etc., which have to be considered. True poems write themselves—true poets are never conscious of the words as they come. True poetry always flows from within, never from with-

out. Yet a too great facility is often as fatal as labouring achievement; smooth ease transforms strength and beauty into refined prettinesses.

Every woman is a poet—instinctively and naturally. But women fail of high achievement because they lack the power of adequate and high expression. Then—what is poetry? No definition covers the real thing, because always the spirit is missed in the explanation. For those who know, poetry can be distinguished from verse as easily as chalk from cheese. There is a flair, a something, which says "This is poetry" and "This is not poetry." Except for purposes of world standards, a hard and fast rule is very difficult to apply, because individual taste and preference always enter into judgment. Keble says, "On the one hand, are the poets who, spontaneously moved by impulse, resort to composition for relief and solace of a burdened or over-wrought mind; on the other, those who for one reason or another, imitate the ideas, the expression and measure of the former." That is good but hardly goes far enough. "Poetry," says Shelley "may be defined as the expression of the imagination." But that definition also courts argument on the breadth and meaning of the word "imagination." Coleridge's idea of poetry still stands perhaps one of the best. Good prose he defined as proper words in their proper places; poetry, the most proper words in the most proper places. It is this instinctive use of the right word that can change the feeling and value of a whole stanza.

I said that women are poets instinctively, and I add that the emotional thrill can be obtained in many other ways than by rhyming words. To me, the humblest scullery-maid, who pauses for a moment in the midst of washing blackened pots and pans to watch the setting sun, and is capable of expressing her feelings only by the words, "Isn't the sunset lovely?" is as much a poet instinctively as the man or woman whose genius reflects itself in a poem. There are people so obsessed by the mystery of beauty that they must remain forever inarticulate for very lack of some medium by which they can give expression to their emotions. Poetry of soul, even of that instinctive, inarticulate kind, thrills no less because it thrills mutely. Most of us are keenly susceptible to beauty and a sense of romance in some form or other, but few of us are able to give vent to our longings in anything but suet-puddings and children's

clothes. Yet that is not to say that the feeling is not there, and alive.

Women, mostly, are versifiers, not poets. They write charmingly, forgably—sometimes—tenderly; but generally they lack that ability for sustained flight and adequate expression which would enable them to reach the highest levels of achievement. The whimsical "Bellerive" wrote years ago:

The she-poet plays with the tiniest things,  
Gauze trousers for fairies and grass-hoppers' wings,  
The shoes of the beetle, the tram fares of gnats,  
And all to get shillings to trim up her hats.

That is not strictly true, but there is an element of truth in it to apply to those who never soar into the realms of poetry.

Yet all the women I am going to deal with have more than a little claim to recognition, because they have soared higher than the many charming verse-writers. Perhaps not one of them can be called great—in a world view—but for ourselves they deserve merit and credit for what they have achieved. More so, because they are our own.

Mary Gilmore must rank high in any history of Australian literature. Her verses have an intensity which has sometimes marred her expression, but her sincerity, force and passion are noteworthy in a welter of smooth, charming rhymes. "Had I felt less intensely," she says, "I would have had an easy command of words. *Marrid* was written in snatched moments, consequently only such thought as could be seized and shaped in a few moments could be taken for expression. *Marrid* was written at the wash-tub, while baking bread, house cleaning and all the rest. If I could not get my hands out of the dough or the suds quickly enough, the thought was lost."

Everybody knows the homeliness of *Marrid*:

It's singin' in an' out,  
An' feelin' full of grace;  
Here 'n' there, up an' down,  
An' round about th' place.

It's rollin' up your sleeves,  
An' whitenin' up the hearth,  
An' scrubbin' out th' floors,  
An' sweepin' down th' path;

It's bakin' tarts an' pies,  
An' shinin' up th' knives;  
An' feelin' 's if some days  
Was wortha thousand lives.

It's watchin' out th' door,  
An' watchin' by th' gate;  
An' watchin' down th' road,  
An' wonderin' why he's late . . .

An' flushin' all at once,  
An' smilin' just so sweet,  
An' feelin' real proud  
The place is fresh an' neat.

An' feelin' awful glad  
Like them that watched Silo'm;  
An' everything because  
A man is comin' Home!

Mary Gilmore was born on August 16, 1865—racially Celtic, with French and a little Spaniard blood in earlier generations. As an infant of three she was very sensitive to music—if Celtic. She would beg her mother to sing *The Irish Emigrant* and *The Bonnie Hills of Scotland*, and certain musical phrases in these caused almost an anguish of emotional feeling. She would creep out of the room to weep unseen, and get blamed for asking for what she would not listen to.

Mary Gilmore (Mary Cameron: she married in 1897 William Alexander Gilmore in Colonia, an offshoot of New Australia in Paraguay, South America) began to write at 6½ or 7 years—a fury of composition chiefly in the form of letters. "Hitherto," she says, "I had written set copies and dictation, but had not known that I could use words to express my own thoughts. Could scarcely eat, and never played at the school in the dinner, filling slate after slate with compositions, imaginative and descriptive of natural phenomena such as sunshine, red roads, wind, rain, sky, the colours of a cow, or how wonderful was the shine and colour of a chesnut horse, etc."

Later she went as a pupil teacher to Wagga for four years, and later still to Sydney, where she became interested in the Labour Movement through William Lane. She worked with him for the New Australia movement, and went to Paraguay a theoretical Socialist and returned after five years' experience a confirmed Socialist.

"The war and its conditions have justified our experiment," she says, "We failed because we were then but one white drop in a world-ocean not white. To-day we would not fail, because the world trend is

toward and not from us. Paraguay would take a whole book to itself—us and our stories, our tragedies, our comedies, our serious childishness, our ridiculous Britishness, our influence on half a continent: 'The Australlians work like three men and are sober; the English are drunken . . . said South America.'"

After the party left Paraguay Mary Cameron went to Buenos Ayres for a while, then through Uruguay to Patagonia, and after much hardship returned to Australia via London and Bombay.

Mary Gilmore has edited the Women's Page of *The Worker* since the beginning of 1908. Her books are *Merrid and Other Verses*, *The Worker Cook Book*, *The Tale of Fiddley Winks*, *The Passionate Heart*. Three books are to come—one in prose and two in verse.

Her last book, *The Passionate Heart*, is the book of a true woman, and contains some of her best work. Her memorial verses for our dead, are among the noblest threnodies yet written in Australia, and *The Corn* is probably one of the most starkly tragic pieces of verse which has been penned by a woman anywhere:

O wind of hell that smote the corn  
And whipped it down to swathes forlorn!  
O wind of hell that split the blood  
That poured upon the corn in flood!  
The corn that all men set for food;  
And human corn created good.  
O horror of The Thousand Days,  
That drew across the world a trail  
Where the only sound was a broken wail;  
Where the gallant corn was trodden down,  
And the mud rose over it stale and brown!

O human corn of the serried ranks,  
What was the wind that left you blanks?  
The hungry wind that asked for you  
Knows only a shuddering through and through;  
Knows only the cry of the broken heart,  
And the empty stand in the harvest mart.  
The yellow corn, the ripened morn,  
The evening came and we knew it not;  
We only heard the whining shot;  
We only knew the wind of death  
Had swept upon it with dreadful death.

*These Fellowing Men* is a regretful dirge for the young blood spent, of noble souls struggling, yet there is a measure of hope running throughout it all:

Let us make lamentation for our young,  
Make lamentation for our dead,  
Weeping with all the mothers of the world,  
Whose blood in these is shed.

But shall the blood beget new seed,  
And the grave be root of flower,  
When the world makes pause to look at the dead,  
And the long hate dies in an hour.

Mary Gilmore is the poet of striving humanity, and mother-kindness permeates a great many of her verses. Here is the delightful *Gipsy Babe*:

Thy mother was a lover  
(Sleep, baby, sleep!)  
Thou shalt have for cover  
Wool from the sheep;

Thou shalt have for pillow  
Down from the swan:—  
Mothers have been lovers  
Since the world began.

Thou shalt have for lantern  
Where we make home,  
Starlight and love-light  
Till the day come.

Thou shalt have for angel  
Watching over thee,  
Deep in the heather,  
One golden bee.

Thou shalt wake up laughing  
When sleep is done;  
Mother was a lover,  
Round, ruddy one!

Then there is the whimsy of cobwebs sparkling in the sunlight, rainbows, sea-shells and gossamer:

The moon came dancing down the sky  
All in her silver shoon;  
The dewdrops held her a looking glass,  
And the fairies piped her a tune.


And, oh, the star-dust under her feet,  
Flashed and sparkled and flew,  
As she danced as light as a fairy might  
On the tips of her dainty shoe.

Woman's cry throughout the ages is epitomised in *Eve-Song*: one of the finest things in *The Passionate Heart*:

I span and Eve span  
A thread to bind the heart of man;  
But the heart of man was a wandering thing  
That came and went with little to bring;  
Nothing he minded what he made  
As here he loitered, and there he stayed.

I span and Eve span  
A thread to bind the heart of man;  
But the more we span the more we found  
It wasn't his heart but ours we bound!  
For children gathered about our knees;  
The thread was a chain that stole our ease.  
And one of us learned in our children's eyes  
That more than man was love and prize.  
But deep in the heart of one of us lay  
A root of loss and hidden dismay.

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