

Classic Poetry Series

Alfred George Stephens
- poems -

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Alfred George Stephens(28 August 1865 - 15 April 1933)

Alfred George Stephens was an Australian writer and literary critic, notably for The Bulletin. He was appointed to that position by its owner, J. F. Archibald in 1894.

Life

Alfred George Stephens was born in Toowoomba, Queensland on August 28th, 1865. He attended Toowoomba Grammar School until the age of 15 when he went to Sydney to learn the printing trade. While there he also gained certificates in French and German from Sydney Technical College. Returning to Queensland in 1889 he became the editor of country newspapers at Gympie and Cairns and sub-editor of "The Boomerang" in Brisbane. During his stay in Cairns he won a prize for an essay titled Why North Queensland Wants Separation which was published as a pamphlet. It was here too that he met Constance Smith whom he was later to marry.

In 1893 he visited the World's Fair at Chicago as correspondent for a number of Australian newspapers. He travelled in Canada and Europe before settling as a journalist in London on the Daily Chronicle. In response to an offer from J.F. Archibald he returned to Australia in 1894 to commence work on "The Bulletin" as a general writer and sub-editor of verses and stories. In the same year an account of his experiences abroad was published as A Queenslander's Travel Notes.

In 1896 he instituted, and became editor of, The Bulletin's famous literary section "The Red Page". This was to be a major force in fostering an appreciation of literature among a generation of Australians. He was also placed in charge of the book publishing department and between 1897 and 1905 he selected and edited 23 works including Such Is Life by Tom Collins, Steele Rudd's On Our Selection and the poems of <a href="

In 1906 he left "The Bulletin" to set up on his own as an independent literary agent, publisher and writer. He revived "The Bookfellow" as a weekly but when this venture failed because of insufficient capital, he accepted the position of assistant editor on the "Evening Post" in Wellington, New Zealand.

He returned to Sydney in 1909 and in 1911 he again revived "The Bookfellow", this time as a monthly magazine. It was suspended in 1916 while he edited the

successful Anzac Memorial, a miscellany of art, prose and verse published by the Returned Soldiers Association, but was recommenced in 1919 and continued to appear at irregular intervals until 1925. It was during this period that he published a series of notable interviews with prominent people including J.C. Williamson, Gladys Moncrieff and Somerset Maugham. He also continued his policy of publishing small volumes of verse including three collections of John Shaw Neilson's poems.

Following the demise of "The Bookfellow" he continued as a freelance journalist, publisher and confidant of writers. Despite financial hardship he maintained his vision of a distinctly Australian literature which, while acknowledging its European origins, would nevertheless achieve an importance and value of its own. He died at Sydney on 15 April 1933.

Babylon

Babylon has fallen! Aye; but Babylon endures
Wherever human wisdom shines or human folly lures;
Where lovers lingering walk beside, and happy children play,
Is Babylon! Babylon! for ever and for aye.
The plan is rudely fashioned, the dream is unfulfilled,
Yet all is in the archetype if but a builder willed;
And Babylon is calling us, the microcosm of men,
To range her walls in harmony and lift her spires again;
The sternest walls, the proudest spires, that ever sun shone on,
Halting a space his burning race to gaze on Babylon.

Babylon has fallen! Aye; but Babylon shall stand:
The mantle of her majesty is over sea and land.
Hers is the name of challenge flung, a watchword in the fight
To grapple grim eternities and gain the old delight;
And in the word the dream is hid, and in the dream the deed,
And in the deed the mastery for those who dare to lead.
Surely her day shall come again, surely her breed be born
To urge the hope of humankind and scale the peaks of morn --

To fight as they who fought till death their bloody field upon,
And kept the gate against the Fate frowning on Babylon.
Babylon

Alfred George Stephens

The Hanging Judge

I am the Judge, the flower of the law,
Bolstered in, privileged, all men's awe;
When I am pleased to display my wit
The court is a-cackle with joy of it;
When my liver is slightly out of order
Woe to who crosses me—barrister, warder!
How do I rule the obsequious gang?
The secret is simple—I always hang!
One plant in my legal garden grows:
The mandrake's shriek is the solace I chose;
And I water my treasure whenever I can
With the blood that drips from a gibbeted man.
Justice? Fiddlesticks! Mercy? Fudge!
I am the Judge!
I am the Judge. I like to dine
Before I charge: then, flushed with wine,
I bully the jury into submission
And rise to the height of judicial ambition.
O how I thrill deliciously
At the wretch in his anguish under me!
I gather my brows in a terrible frown,
The slow beads drop from his forehead down;
I lower my voice, and my eyes I roll:
"The Lord have mercy upon your soul!"
He lifts his hands; but—"Sheriff!" I shout,
And his knees give way as they drag him out.
Into eternity he shall trudge.
I am the Judge!
I am the Judge. A Judge should be
A pattern of humble piety.
A week well spent brings Sabbath content:
To church my steps are piously bent.
When the holy man reads the holy book
I grieve for the god, by gods forsook,
So clumsily crucified: pity rises
He was not a remanet to My assizes!
But when at the door they stand aside
To watch me pass, how I swell with pride
To hear them say, "That's Him all right!"

He hanged another one yesterday night!
The jury cried mercy, he wouldn't budge,
He is the Judge!"

I am the Judge. When at Michael's trump
The dead from their mouldering sepulchres jump,
And the Great Judge sits on his jewelled throne
To give each man the crop he has sown,
Up I'll come with my little lot
Taut in the loop of a hangman's knot!
I will bring them trooping, trooping in
With my quaint black halter-mark under each chin:
"Sweet Lord! the fruit of my gallows tree;
The images I have made of Thee!"...

Lo, he doffs his robes and his golden crown;
He kneels at my feet in obeisance down—
"Make me your servant, usher, drudge:
You are the Judge!"

I shall be Judge. And O, 't will be merry
With Space one vast gaol cemetery!
For I'll choke the choir at their morning hymn
And I'll stifle the star-eyed seraphim:
I will hang the gods, I will hang the devils,
I'll throttle the imps in the midst of their revels;
And when remains of all Creation,
But one alive from strangulation,
To my own soul's throat a garrote I'll fit
With a long drop into the bottomless Pit:
I'll leap from the dais exultingly,
And while I smother in agony
Of the whole hushed Universe I will swear
I am the Executioner.

Alfred George Stephens