

Classic Poetry Series

Charles Henry Soutar
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Charles Henry Soutar(11 October 1864 - 20 August 1944)

Charles Henry Souter , medical practitioner and writer, was born on 11 October 1864 at Aberdeen, Scotland, eldest son of John Clement Souter, general practitioner, and his wife Helen, née Coutts. John, an accomplished pencil and water-colour artist, collected 'rare classical books and old English china and coins'. The family shifted to Nottingham, England, and in 1872 to Upper Holloway, London. Charles went to Highgate and University College schools, and at 14 was registered as a medical student under his father's tuition at the Royal College of Surgeons.

Sailing in the clipper City of Corinth as ship's surgeon, John brought his family to Sydney in March 1879; on the advice of Archbishop Vaughan, they settled inland at Coonabarabran. Charles had enjoyed the sea voyage and gained a lifelong interest in ships and sailors' songs. He worked on the family selection and became an expert horseman.

In August 1882 Souter went to Scotland to study medicine at the University of Aberdeen (M.B., C.M., 1887). He married with Catholic rites Jane Ann Raeburn, daughter of a master baker, on 11 May 1887. Back in New South Wales they moved to Hillston, but, after the birth of a daughter, Jane died in 1889. Souter sailed to Hong Kong as ship's surgeon and then made a number of coastal voyages. In 1891 he went to Balaklava, South Australia, where he practised until 1905. He married Lucy de Neufville Lucas on 28 April 1896 in Adelaide; she bore him a son. After a year in the city he was at Clarendon (1907-09), Prospect (1910-23), Whyalla (1923-24) and North Adelaide (1925-44). His father and brother also practised medicine in South Australia.

With a wide brow, high cheekbones and a moustache, Charles had a warm smile and dapper appearance. From 1896 he contributed to the Bulletin, sometimes using the pseudonyms 'Nil' and 'Dr Nil'. Admired and supported by editors and critics as varied as J. F. Archibald, S. H. Prior, Vance and Nettie Palmer, A. G. Stephens and H. M. Green, he published four collections of verse: Irish Lords (Sydney, 1912), To Many Ladies (Adelaide, 1917), The Mallee Fire (Sydney, 1923) and The Lonely Rose (Adelaide, 1935). His work is characterized by 'a gentle humanity' and belongs with that of other popular balladists such as E.J. Brady, <a href="

While serving much of his time as a locum tenens, Souter found the leisure to write and sketch; he also composed and played bush songs, bird calls and shanties on his harmonica and flute. Another of his pastimes was 'manufacturing ornaments, clock stands and jewel boxes from mallee roots'. He belonged to the Adelaide Dual Club and was an expert on 5AD's radio session, 'Information Please'. Survived by his wife, daughter and son, he died at North Adelaide on 20 August 1944 and was buried with Catholic rites in West Terrace cemetery. He was not related to D. H. Souter.

Bound For Sourabaya!

OH, the moon shines bright, and we sail to-night,
And we're bound for Sourabaya!
So it's 'Farewell, Jane!' for we're off again
With the turning of the tide!
Oh, the Java girls haven't got no curls,
But they'll meet us on the Praya,
And, Malay or Dutch, well, the odds ain't much,
And the ocean's deep and wide!

We're bound for Sourabaya, boys,
Where the girls are kind and brown!
By the break of day we'll be far away!
Farewell to Sydney town!

Oh, the girls look glum, when the parting's come,
And we're bound for Sourabaya!
And they weep and wail, cos' the ship must sail
With the turning of the tide!
But we soon forget, when our sheets are wet
And the dancing dolphins play—ah,
And the gale pipes high in the mackerel sky,
And the ocean's deep and wide!

We're bound for Sourabaya, boys,
Where the girls are kind and brown,
And they hope and pray that we've come to stay!
Farewell to Sydney town!

When the coin's all gone, and the hatches on,
And we're bound for Sourabaya,
There's a kiss for Nell, and a long farewell,
With the turning of the tide!
But there's not much wrong, and it don't last long,
Tho' she mourns you for a day—ah!
And she wears no black if you don't come back!
For the ocean's deep and wide!

And we're bound for Sourabaya, boys,
Where the girls are kind and brown,

So we'll drink once more,
While we're on the shore,
Farewell to Sydney town!

Charles Henry Soutar

Harvest Time

When the cranky German waggon,
With its ten or fifteen bag on
Comes a-jerkin' and a-joltin' down the dusty, limestone street,
And the "Norther's" blowin' blindin',
And the rollers are a-grindin',
And the agent jabs his sampler thro' the sackin' to the wheat,
Let 'em slide along the plank! slide along! slide along!
Sixty bushels for the Bank; slide along!

When your back is fairly breakin'
And your very fingers shakin'
With the heavin', heavin', heavin', in the blarsted, blazin' sun;
And the agent finds the spots out
And takes all his sample lots out
Where its rusty, pinched, or smutty—knockin' off five pound a ton;
Sling 'em over with a jerk! slide along! slide along!
Sixty days of wasted work! slide along!

Sixty days a-ploughin' mallee
In the God-forgotten valley
Of the creepin', crawlin' Murray, with the dingoes for your mates!
Sow and harrow, roll and reap it,
But you get no show to keep it,
For it's "Boom and bust yer biler" when the cocky speculates!
Let the bankers take the lot: slide along! slide along!
Farmin' mallee's bloomin' rot—slide along!

Charles Henry Soutar

Shifting Sand

Do you see that post a-stickin in the sand?
Just the point of it a-poking thro' the sand?
Me and Madge put in that fence.
Yes! We should have had more sense!
We was young, you see, and didn't understand.

Twenty years come next November we began;
There was nothing here but scrub when we began --
Sold the farm on 'Dingo Flat,'
And put all we had in that!
Into blasted shifting sand and 'Take-all pan.'

This here paddick--which? Why where you're standing now
(Oh! it was one, tho' you wouldn't think so now!)
Well, we grubbed it, nice and neat,
And we gut it in with wheat;
And we didn't reap enough to feed the cow!

In the early spring the sand began to shift ---
In a 'Norther' have you ever seen it shift?
Well, it all went in a night,
Not a blade was left in sight
When we come to look next morning at the drift!

Round the back there, by them stunted pepper-trees;
Hardly anything will live here but them trees.
Madge is lying there, asleep,
With the sand above her, deep:
Deep and loose enough to sink you to the knees!

Many other things are buried on the land,
Things you can't get back from any kind of land,
Youth and hope, and tears and sweat,
Wasted work and vain regret,
In the sneaking, creeping, greedy, shifting sand!

Charles Henry Soutar

The Mallee Fire

I SUPPOSE it just depends on where you're raised,
Once I met a cove as swore by green belar!
Couldn't sight the good old mallee-stump I praised;
Well!—I couldn't sight belar, and there you are!
But the faces in the fire where the mallee stump's a-blinking
Are the friendliest I ever seen, to my way o' thinking!

In the city where the fires is mostly coal—
There! I can't a-bear to go and warm my feet!
Spitting, fizzing things as hasn't got no soul!
Things as puffs out yaller smoke instead of heat!
But at home—well, it is home when the mallee-stump's a-burning,
And the evenin's drawing chilly and the season is a-turning.

And there's some as runs 'em down because they're tough.
Well? And what's the good of anythink as ain't?
No. It's nary use to serve 'em any bluff,
For they'd use up all the patience of a saint.
But they'll split as sweet as sugar if you know the way to take 'em;
If you don't, there isn't nothink in the world as'll make 'em.

They're tremenjus hard to kindle, tho', at first:
Like the friendship of the kind that comes to stay.
You can blow and blow and blow until you burst,
And when they won't, they won't burn, anyway!
But when once they gets a start, tho' they make no showy flashes,
Well, they'll serve you true and honest to the last pinch of ashes

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