

Classic Poetry Series

Henry Laurie

- poems -

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Henry Laurie(22 September 1837- 14 May 1922)

Henry Laurie, journalist and philosopher, was born on 22 September 1837 at Comely Bank, Edinburgh, son of William Francis Hunter Laurie, writer to the signet, and his wife Christina, née Bayne. After attending the Edinburgh Academy, he studied literature and mental and moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh in 1856-60. A gifted student, strongly influenced by A. Campbell Fraser, he won essay and poetry prizes and the Staten gold medal in moral philosophy. Laurie did not graduate: a breakdown in health induced, instead, his migration to Canada and, in September 1864, to Victoria. He settled at Warrnambool where, in January 1866, having failed to become a school inspector, he was appointed town clerk.

At Warrnambool Laurie pursued his literary interests as a member of the Shakespearian and Western Caledonian societies and as a contributor to Richard Osburne's Warrnambool Examiner. In October 1867 he relinquished his clerical position for a five-year lease of the Examiner in partnership with William Fairfax, an experienced printer and journalist. The partners, in collaboration with George Robertson, published Laurie's penetrating pamphlet, *Conservatism and Democracy*, in 1868 and in 1872 they established the bi-weekly (later more frequent) Warrnambool Standard. From 1877 Laurie was sole proprietor of the paper which competed so successfully with the Examiner as to absorb it in 1880. J. F. Archibald who, as an apprentice, followed Laurie from the Examiner to the Standard, greatly admired the stylish editing (and the courageous support of free selection) of his 'scholarly' if 'somewhat moody' employer; he acknowledged that Laurie taught him to cut.

In August 1881 the lecturer in logic at the University of Melbourne, Frederick Joy Pirani, died after a fall from his horse. Laurie, with excellent credentials from Edinburgh and author of a timely article in the November issue of the *Victorian Review* supporting the establishment of a chair of philosophy, was, in December, appointed in Pirani's place. He sold the Standard and next year commenced duty as lecturer in mental and moral philosophy as well as in logic. In May 1886, on assuming the new Melbourne chair, he became the first professor of mental and moral philosophy in Australia; that year he received an honorary LL.D. from St Andrew's University. On 11 January 1871 in Melbourne, with Presbyterian forms, Laurie had married Frances, daughter of William Spalding, a Scottish professor of rhetoric and logic. With his wife and three sons he was among the first to occupy the professorial houses built on the Melbourne campus in 1887.

Devoted to the search for truth, Laurie was much praised as a teacher. He

delivered his lectures from full notes with 'convincing earnestness'; his aim was not to present a systematic formulation of his own philosophical position which, stemming from the Scottish common-sense school, was based on his belief in the veracity of consciousness, but to elucidate the theories of others and to encourage fair-minded yet searching criticism. His students, among whom were E. Morris Miller, (Sir) Walter Murdoch and (Sir) John Latham, were taught, in plain terms, to think for themselves. Latham judged Laurie 'the best of the Profs'. In 1893 he was first president of the mental science and education section of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science and in his address urged the establishment of psychological laboratories. In 1911-14 he served on the special committee appointed by the 1911 Australasian Medical Congress to ascertain the extent of mental deficiency in Australia.

Laurie's Scottish Philosophy in its National Development (Glasgow, 1902) was his main published work. Other important writings are Some Thoughts on Immortality (Melbourne, 1901), originally the last of a series of lectures on Kantian ethics, and an investigation of the ideas of J. S. Mill, 'Methods of inductive inquiry', published in Mind (1893).

Laurie's interests continued to range beyond philosophy. For several years in the 1890s he wrote the leading article in the Australasian and in 1901 several of his poems were published in Pro Patria et Regina (edited by William Knight). He delivered university extension lectures on [Robert Browning](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-browning/) and contributed a paper at the 1912 Browning centenary celebrations in London. In 1921 he published Plato in English Literature, an address to the Classical Association of Victoria.

In spite of his success Laurie, 'a tall, spare man with square red beard and heavy red eyebrows', was excessively shy. He was too inhibited to attend the dining club he formed with a friend and few outside his intimate circle knew what a fine conversationalist he was. He remained a devout Christian.

After his retirement in 1911 Laurie lived at The Righi, South Yarra. Predeceased by his wife, he died at home on 14 May 1922 and was buried in Boroondara cemetery. A portrait by Tom Roberts is held by the University of Melbourne.

Nora

CALM and fair
Flows the stream of Nora's life,
Moving with a lazy air
Far from strife.

Goddesses
Must have looked from just such eyes,
Full of still felicities,—
No surprise,

No endeavour
(For endeavour mars perfection),
And, one almost fancies, never
Strong affection.

Far too cold
Seems that face for dream of mine,
Though, if set in sculptured mould,
How divine!

As she stands
Looking from the window forth,
Gazing o'er the sunny lands
To the north,

Light and shade
Cross and quiver to and fro,
By the she-oak's tresses made,
Waving slow

In the breeze;
But no varying light you trace,
Save from flittings such as these,
On her face.

Calmly moving
On her daily household ways,
Little can you see for loving,
Much for praise.

One alone
Sets her quiet life aglow,
And, whene'er she hears his tone,
Then, I know

That her form
Has a richer, fuller grace,
And the colour rushes warm
To her face.

From her eyes
All the hidden life peeps out,
From her lips strange melodies
Float about

All astir,
Thoughts and hopes, unguessed before,
Gleam, till Love can ask of her
Nothing more.

'Tis as though,
Walking on a charmèd shore,
Blind to all the gleam and glow
Which it bore,

On our sight
Flashed the flush of roses blowing,
Dewdrops sparkling in the light,
Rivers flowing;

For at last
One had come, whose star-tipt wand
Woke to gladness, as he passed
Through the land.

Shall we then
Grudge the favoured one his due?
Fate gives wands to other men,
Charmèd too!

Unaware

While we wander to and fro,
Flowers may blossom here and there
As we go.

Lives are bound
Each to each by secret spell,
And a fairy-land lies round
Us as well.

Henry Laurie