

Classic Poetry Series

**James Lister Cuthbertson**  
**- poems -**

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# James Lister Cuthbertson(8 May 1851 – 18 January 1910)

James Lister Cuthbertson, poet-schoolmaster, was born on 8 May 1851 in Glasgow, Scotland, the eldest son of William Gilmour Cuthbertson and his wife Jane Agnes Lister. He boarded at Trinity College, Glenalmond, Perthshire, in 1861-69 and in 1872 obtained a postmastership at Merton College, Oxford, as an Indian Civil Service probationer. But he failed in a periodical service examination and so could not proceed.

In 1874 his father was a bank manager in Adelaide, and Cuthbertson sailed for Australia. At the beginning of 1875, well recommended professionally from Tasmania, he became classical master at Geelong Church of England Grammar School, Victoria, under John Bracebridge Wilson. He held this post until December 1882, and resumed it in October 1885, but meanwhile returned to Oxford (B.A., 1885). When Wilson died in October 1895 Cuthbertson bridged a small gap between headmasters. He left the staff finally in December 1896, and joined his mother in England, but returned to Geelong in December 1897. At first resident locally, and later chiefly at Cheltenham, near Melbourne, he maintained the close contact with Geelong Grammar School which he had never lost. He became an occasional journalist, sometimes wintered in Queensland, and in summer usually fished in the Glenelg estuary on the South Australian border. Disappointing conditions there at the close of 1909 sent him on to Mount Gambier where, after more than three weeks of illness dogged by insomnia, he died of an overdose of veronal on 18 January 1910.

Cuthbertson remained a bachelor. Once prefect at a foundation designed to accustom Scotland to English public school methods, he devoted himself to establishing the same system and ideals in Australia. He was fortunate in his chief, and in their setting. Wilson supported him. The Gothic bluestone building which housed Geelong Grammar School from 1858 to 1914 soon acquired dignity and beauty, and commanded a convenient crest between bay and river, within easy reach of a varied countryside.

The university successes, both as students and oarsmen, of boys whom Cuthbertson trained give some indication of his professional competence. His founding editorship of the Grammar School Annual and Quarterly, the adoption of the prefect system, the organization of interschool competitions, and the acquisition of cricket ground and boatshed, all before 1880, show his general influence. His lively concern with all aspects of school life, and special interest in

rowing, were never abandoned.

But Cuthbertson's magic lay in his harmony with boys, in his power to knit the Australian and British backgrounds, and clear the vision. He quoted Gladstone as saying, 'you must make up your minds to be good ancestors', and urged integrity, courage, persistent unselfish efforts, brotherhood and other Christian standards upon lads whose common sense, unwarped by sophistication, responded warmly. He touched their imaginations with rhymes which, as *Grammar School Verses*, appeared in collected form in 1879. Cuthbertson taught through the *Quarterly*, but never mawkishly. Successive leaders dealt with pocket money, scholarships, the prefect system, 'die biting' (by a boy), Glenalmond prefects, and reading: 'Of stories of school life our old friend Tom Brown stands peerless: there the boys are boys, and not young prigs'.

A slim *Barwon Ballads* was published in 1893. By that time Cuthbertson moved easily between verse and poetry. But nearly all his writing was inspired by his experiences at Geelong, by cheerful down-river days or contacts around the school or in the classroom. His last poem for the *Quarterly* appeared posthumously. His last prose contribution, printed only a month before he died, was a charming recollection of scholastic attitudes, in which he showed his concern for the average boy, and blamed himself for most of any difficulties: 'One has lost temper, or (unpardonable fault) been sarcastic, or in some way has been a fool and forgotten that the boys know you a great deal better than you know them'.

Cuthbertson certainly had an Achilles heel, but it bore no scar. He seemed unconscious of it and stood so naturally upright that it was seldom exposed. His weakness was constitutional and intermittent, and was concealed by his frank and genial manner. It prevented his succession to Wilson and caused his retirement. But whenever it crippled his genius he was shielded by boys and men who loved and honoured him.

A memorial edition of his poems, *Barwon Ballads and School Verses*, edited by E. T. Williams, who held his classical mastership, was published by Geelong Grammar School in 1912. Lawrence Adamson, headmaster of Wesley College, Melbourne, and chief compiler of the *Wesley College Song Book*, called it an undying treasure, the largest, most complete, and most exclusive collection of school verses published, with a normal level equal to that of 'Forty Years On'. The proceeds from this book were used to found school essay prizes. As a keen cricketer, Cuthbertson himself provided an annual fielding award. He left funds to establish a closed university scholarship. It was natural that a schoolhouse on the new site at Corio should bear his name. At word of his death, all who knew him

felt as one of his earliest students, who sent from an Essex rectory both a Latin valete and verses which concluded:

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

In peace, dear master, may'st thou rest!

Thee we remember at thy best,

And leave with God; for God is just.

# At Cape Schanck

Down to the lighthouse pillar  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;The rolling woodland comes,  
Gay with the gold of she-oaks  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And the green of the stunted gums,  
With the silver-grey of honeysuckle,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;With the wasted bracken red,  
With a tuft of softest emerald  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And a cloud-flecked sky o'erhead.

We climbed by ridge and boulder,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Umber and yellow scarred,  
Out to the utmost precipice,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;To the point that was ocean-barred,  
Till we looked below on the fastness  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Of the breeding eagle's nest,  
And Cape Wollomai opened eastward  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And the Otway on the west.

Over the mirror of azure  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;The purple shadows crept,  
League upon league of rollers  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Landward evermore swept,  
And burst upon gleaming basalt,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And foamed in cranny and crack,  
And mounted in sheets of silver,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And hurried reluctant back.

And the sea, so calm out yonder,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Wherever we turned our eyes,  
Like the blast of an angel's trumpet  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Rang out to the earth and skies,  
Till the reefs and the rocky ramparts  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Throbbled to the giant fray,  
And the gullies and jutting headlands  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Were bathed in a misty spray.

Oh, sweet in the distant ranges,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;To the ear of inland men,  
Is the ripple of falling water

&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;In sassafras-haunted glen,  
The stir in the ripening cornfield  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;That gently rustles and swells,  
The wind in the wattle sighing,  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;The tinkle of cattle bells.

But best is the voice of ocean,  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;That strikes to the heart and brain,  
That lulls with its passionate music  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Trouble and grief and pain,  
That murmurs the requiem sweetest  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;For those who have loved and lost,  
And thunders a jubilant anthem  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;To brave hearts tempest-tossed.

That takes to its boundless bosom  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;The burden of all our care,  
That whispers of sorrow vanquished,  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Of hours that may yet be fair,  
That tells of a Harbour of Refuge  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Beyond life's stormy straits,  
Of an infinite peace that gladdens,  
    &nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Of an infinite love that waits.

James Lister Cuthbertson

# Australian Federata

AUSTRALIA! land of lonely lake  
And serpent-haunted fen;  
Land of the torrent and the fire  
And forest-sundered men:  
Thou art not now as thou shalt be  
When the stern invaders come,  
In the hush before the hurricane,  
The dread before the drum.  
A louder thunder shall be heard  
Than echoes on thy shore,  
When o'er the blackened basalt cliffs  
The foreign cannon roar—  
When the stand is made in the sheoaks' shade  
When heroes fall for thee,  
And the creeks in gloomy gullies run  
Dark crimson to the sea:

When under honeysuckles gray,  
And wattles' swaying gold,  
The stalwart arm may strike no more,  
The valiant heart is cold—  
When thou shalt know the agony,  
The fever, and the strife  
Of those who wrestle against odds  
For liberty and life:

Then is the great Dominion born,  
The seven sisters bound,  
From Sydney's greenly wooded port  
To lone King George's Sound—  
Then shall the islands of the south,  
The lands of bloom and snow,  
Forth from their isolation come  
To meet the common foe.

Then, only then—when after war  
Is peace with honour born,  
When from the bosom of the night  
Comes golden-sandalled morn,

When laurelled victory is thine,  
And the day of battle done,  
Shall the heart of a mighty people stir,  
And Australia be as one.

James Lister Cuthbertson



# Corona Inutilis

I TWINED a wreath of heather white  
To bind my lady's hair,  
And deemed her locks in even light  
Would well the burden bear;  
But when I saw the tresses brown,  
And found the face so fair,  
I tore the wreath, and left the crown  
Of beauty only there.

James Lister Cuthbertson

# Ode To Apollo

"Tandem venias precamur  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Nube candentes humeros amictus  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Augur Apollo."

&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Lord of the golden lyre  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Fraught with the Dorian fire,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Oh! fair-haired child of Leto, come again;  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And if no longer smile  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Delphi or Delos' isle,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Come from the depth of thine Aetnean glen,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Where in the black ravine  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Thunders the foaming green  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Of waters writhing far from mortals' ken;  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Come o'er the sparkling brine,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And bring thy train divine --  
The sweet-voiced and immortal violet-crowned Nine.

&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;For here are richer meads,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And here are goodlier steeds  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Than ever graced the glorious land of Greece;  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Here waves the yellow corn,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Here is the olive born --  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;The gray-green gracious harbinger of peace;  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Here too hath taken root  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;A tree with golden fruit,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;In purple clusters hangs the vine's increase,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And all the earth doth wear  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;The dry clear Attic air  
That lifts the soul to liberty, and frees the heart from care.

&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Or if thy wilder mood  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Incline to solitude,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Eternal verdure girds the lonely hills,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Through the green gloom of ferns  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Softly the sunset burns,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Cold from the granite flow the mountain rills;  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;And there are inner shrines  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Made by the slumberous pines,  
&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;&nbsp;Where the rapt heart with contemplation fills,



James Lister Cuthbertson

# Solitude

This is the maiden Solitude, too fair  
For mortal eyes to gaze on--she who dwells  
In the lone valley where the water wells  
Clear from the marble, where the mountain air  
Is resinous with pines, and white peaks bare  
Their unpolluted bosoms to the stars,  
And holy Reverence the passage bars  
To meaner souls who seek to enter there;  
Only the worshipper at Nature's shrine  
May find that maiden waiting to be won,  
With broad calm brow and meek eyes of the dove,  
May drink the rarer ether all divine,  
And, earthly toils and earthly troubles done,  
May win the longed-for sweetness of her love.

James Lister Cuthbertson

# The Australian Sunrise

The Morning Star paled slowly, the Cross hung low to the sea,  
And down the shadowy reaches the tide came swirling free,  
The lustrous purple blackness of the soft Australian night,  
Waned in the gray awakening that heralded the light;  
Still in the dying darkness, still in the forest dim  
The pearly dew of the dawning clung to each giant limb,  
Till the sun came up from ocean, red with the cold sea mist,  
And smote on the limestone ridges, and the shining tree-tops kissed;  
Then the fiery Scorpion vanished, the magpie's note was heard,  
And the wind in the she-oak wavered, and the honeysuckles stirred,  
The airy golden vapour rose from the river breast,  
The kingfisher came darting out of his crannied nest,  
And the bulrushes and reed-beds put off their sallow gray  
And burnt with cloudy crimson at dawning of the day.

James Lister Cuthbertson

# The Bush

GIVE us from dawn to dark  
Blue of Australian skies,  
Let there be none to mark  
Whither our pathway lies.

Give us when noontide comes  
Rest in the woodland free—  
Fragrant breath of the gums,  
Cold, sweet scent of the sea.

Give us the wattle's gold  
And the dew-laden air,  
And the loveliness bold  
Loneliest landscapes wear.

These are the haunts we love,  
Glad with enchanted hours,  
Bright as the heavens above,  
Fresh as the wild bush flowers.

James Lister Cuthbertson

# To A Billy

OLD BILLY—battered, brown and black  
With many days of camping,  
Companion of the bulging sack,  
And friend in all our tramping:  
How often on the Friday night—  
Your cubic measure testing—  
With jam and tea we stuffed you tight  
Before we started nesting!  
How often, in the moonlight pale,  
Through gums and gullies toiling,  
We've been the first the hill to scale,  
The first to watch you boiling;  
When at the lane the tent was spread  
The silver wattle under,  
And early shafts of rosy red  
Cleft sea-born mists asunder!

And so, old Billy, you recall  
A host of sun-burnt faces,  
And bring us back again to all  
The best of camping places.  
True flavour of the bush you bear,  
Of camp and its surrounding,  
Of freedom and of open air,  
Of healthy life abounding.

You bring us more—with those we love  
We watched you boil and bubble,  
And in the sunny skies above  
Forgot each schoolboy trouble  
So not without a kindly glance  
We eye you in the study,  
Although you've met with some mischance,  
Although you're black and muddy!

James Lister Cuthbertson



