

Classic Poetry Series

John Philip Bourke
- poems -

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John Philip Bourke(5 August 1860 – 13 January 1914)

John Philip Bourke was an Australian poet.

Bourke was born in Nundle, New South Wales, on the Peel River diggings, New South Wales, the son of William David Bourke, butcher, and his wife Jane, née Shepherd. After a primary education, he became a prospector with his father. At 17 years of age, he sold a claim for £600. He then became a school teacher in September 1882 and occasionally contributed verse to *The Bulletin*. He retired from the education department in 1887 after being found drunk by a school inspector. In 1894 he went to the recently discovered goldfields in Western Australia, prospected in various parts of the west, and at variously made and lost a considerable sums of money. About the turn of the 20th century Bourke took up journalism and was a regular contributor to the *Kalgoorlie Sun*. He was a writer of vigorous prose and verse which gave him a local reputation, but he was comparatively little known away from the gold-mining towns. He visited the eastern states of Australia for medical advice and to seek a publisher for his books in 1913. Bourke died at Boulder, Western Australia, on 13 January 1914. A selection from his verse, *Off the Bluebush*, edited by A. G. Stephens, was published in Sydney in 1915.

'Bluebush' Bourke was a popular poet, one of the leading poets of the goldfields along with E. B. Murphy. In his own phrase they were "singers standing on the outer rim, who touch the fringe of poetry at times". Murphy wrote more and had the larger audience, but Bourke was the more musical and more often did succeed in touching the fringe of poetry. Bourke's own estimation of his talent was modest:

We singers standing on the outer rim
Who touched the fringe of poesy at times
With half-formed thoughts, rough-set in halting rhymes,
Through which no airy flights of fancy skim —
We write "just so", an hour to while away,
And turn the well-thumbed stock still o'er and o'er ...

The verse and prose of 'Bluebush' is a barometer of changing feelings and attitudes on the Western Australian goldfields. His poems depict local 'characters', scenes of poverty and hardship and the consolation of 'booze'. But a sense of humour is evident and a strong commitment, as part of a radical movement, to mateship and social justice. Many of the poems are addressed specifically to the wide audience of miners and prospectors who read his verse.

A Mulga Romance

Oh, he led his love through the church's aisle,
And he cried 'You bet!' with an eight horse smile.
When, the parson asked would he love and care
For the dainty thing with the forehead fair,
And the dimpled chin and the sun kissed locks,
O he yelled again, 'You may bet yer socks.'

For a rough-cut sleeper was Mulga Jim,
With never the sign of a fly on him.
Then he signed the book and he seized his prize,
With a joyful gleam in his big brown eyes.
As they jumped aboard of the north bound traín,
Oh, he gathered his girl, to his chest again.
And the days went by with a new-born vim
At the wayback mansion of Mulga Jim.

And the stars loomed bright and the sky loomed clear
Till nearing the end of the first half-year.
Then one fateful morning dressed neat and trim
A woman tripped out from the camp of Jim.
As laughing and smiling, 'I wish you joy,'
She said, 'You're the dad of a bouncing boy.'
Then Mulga Jim studied and scratched his head,
' Well, that I guess is a record,' he said.
'A plume in the cap of a way-back bloke -
The first damn record that ever I broke.'

Then he cut no caper nor went off 'pop,'
But closed the shutters of 'Cupid's' shop.
And he coiled his swag and he greased his straps
And said 'Good-bye' to the mulga chaps.
Then as fast and far from the scene he hied,
Who'd a' guessed it was loaded?' he sadly sighed.

John Philip Bourke

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With head erect I fought the fight
Or mingled with the dance,
And now I merge into the night
With utter nonchalance.

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We write 'just so,' an hour to while away,
And turn the well-thumbed stock still o'er and o'er,
As men have done a thousand times before,
And will again, just as we do to-day . . .
If I could take that rosebud from its stem,
And weare its petals in a simple rhyme,
So you could hear the bells of springtime chime
And you could see the flower soul in them

Or else, we'll say, a magpie on the limb,
Greeting the sunrise with its matin song
To catch the music as it floats along,
And link its spirit to a bush-child's hymn.
Or, if but then the limitations rise,
Like barriers across the mental plain,
And mists and things obscure the rhymer's brain,
And dull his ears, and cloud his blinking eyes.

And so we write as Nature sets her gauge
No worse than most, and better, p'raps, than some;
But should a man remain for ever dumb
When only rhyming fills his aimless page?

John Philip Bourke

Life

A little ray from a shaded light
A colour splash on a field of white
Too short a day and a damn long night

A wreath of pain and a faded laugh
A rotten stick for a pilgrim's staff
An ounce of grain and a ton of chaff

A glimpse of youth and a woman's eyes
A long, long look into starlit skies
Mere chips of truth on a stream of lies

A glass of 'hops' and a pint of lees
A year of toil and an hour of ease
Till the worker drops to his broken knees

Then voices flout from life's garden walls
And bedposts grin and the earthworm calls
And lights go out as the curtain falls

Say, will the bark that was tempest-tossed
Still flounder on when the bar is crossed
And night grows dark and the path is lost?

Ah! Cast my lot in the realms of mist
With friends I've loved near the lips I've kissed
For Hell's too hot for a pessimist

John Philip Bourke

Shakin'

Wages ! No, not us old party,
While a rattle's in the shaker
Patched and grimy, strong and hearty,
Best of cobbers with the baker.
She's a beauty - hear her rattle -
Bet she understands her biz, sir ;
Them's the very kind of cattle
Made this country what it is, sir.

Money ? Well, that ain't no topic
For this question of dry blastin' ;
We're alluvial, cold or tropic,
We're alluvial, full or fastin'.
Let her whistle to it, matey,
Keep yer lamps upon the hopper
For the jagged jots and weighty,
Show the gent, all right and proper.

Dusty? Oh, jeust how you take it
Yaller dust is what we wishes ;
Rip the side out, Save, and shake it
Keerful in the blastin' dishes.
Keep your eye to windward, Mister,
Where the dross falls dull and duller
Well ! May imps condemn and blister !
Not a blarsted, blanky color !

Whisky ! Well, as you're so free, sir.
Here's yer health, and to the lydies
Clean forgot that Dave and me, sir,
Never have no luck on Fridays.
But that shaker theer a-glintin'
Surely any sketchin' gaffer
D' make a picter worth the printin'
Praps, you'd like to fortygraf her?

John Philip Bourke

The End Of The Episode

There is no need to say good-bye,
And weep;
There is no call on us for tear or sigh.
Men say: Just as ye sow, so shall ye reap.
Is that, think you, a lie?

Now fate points out our different ways,
And so
We leave the spot where glamour clothed the days—
Leave for those duller worlds that lie below,
With something like amaze.

No use to curse; whatever crossed
Our way,
No need for words; when hearts are tempest-tossed—
But those alone may know the cost, who pay,
And bankrupt, pay the cost.

John Philip Bourke

Upon The Pad To Carey

They coiled the drams and filled the bags.
And whistled loud and gaily,
For now the rush was on at last
They'd been expecting daily ;
It lay beneath the northern star,
And watchful men and wary
Struck outward for the light afar
That beaconed on to Carey.

They'd rocked and riddled, dip and bar
And cursed the day they landed,
For luck, from Cue to Kurawa,
Had kept them fairly stranded.
But Rumor, often false as fleet,
This time had' brought no 'fairy,'
For gold, like spuds at Burrumbeep
Lay in the mud at Carey.

But weary days and goanna holes,
And spinifex, and sandal,
Wore such a darkness round their souls,
They had to light a candle;
In fact they weren't half as glad,
Nor light, and bright, and airy,
As on the day they struck the pad -
That blanky pad to Carey.

And soon, alas ! their lenten meals
Still shorter grew and shorter;
They pricked the blisters on their heels -
Their last supply of water.
And some grew of a prayerful mood,
Whilst sinners, lank and hairy,
Spat curses red at every rood
Upon the pad to Carey.

At last these heroes of the West -
This gallant band and hardy-
Were sung to sleep that held no rest

By bell bird and by bardi ;
And midst the desert twilight-dim,
The obsequies to vary,
A crow cawed from a wambush limb
Beside the pad to Carey.

» Let those who scoff and those who doubt
This tragic tale of sorrow,
Just ask the 'man from, furthest out' -
The first they meet to-morrow -
Of grisly forms of skin and bone,
And ghostly shapes and eerie,
That haunt the death-like monotone
That rings the shores of Carey

John Philip Bourke

When I Am Dead

When I am dead
Bring me no roses white.
Nor lilies spotless
And immaculate,
But from the garden roses red,
Roses full blown
And by the noon sun kissed.
Bring me the roses
That my life has missed
When I am dead.

John Philip Bourke

Where The Light And The Shadows Lie

Many a wind is blowing, .
Our from the weary West,
Many a wave is chasing
Opaline crest on crest ;
Many a ship is sailing
Over the Austral tide,
And all to-night, like a white moth's flight,
Are bound for the Sydney side.

Many a sweet remembrance
In through my tent-door trips.
Many a shade from the days that were,
With a message upon its lips
Many a sound of laughter,
Many a heartfelt sigh,
Come on the breeze, from the Eastern seas,
?Where the light and the shadows lie.

But there's little time for sighing,
And less for a man to weep,
When you're delving far 'neath a sinking star,
Down where the gold lies deep.
Toil, while the fates are watching !
Fail at the task again !
But work and wait at the outer gate
Such are the lives of men.

Little of time for sighing,
Here, while the shadows creep.
And bright stars shine in the secret mine,
Down where the heart depths sleep.
Season and sense will waver,
Whisper, and pass me by.
For my heart has hied to the Sydney side,
Where the light and the shadows lie.

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