

Classic Poetry Series

Marcus Clarke
- poems -

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Marcus Clarke(24 April 1846 – 2 August 1881)

Marcus Clarke (1846-1881) had a short but productive life. Born in England, his early expectations of a large inheritance were disappointed and it was decided that he should emigrate to Australia where he had connections. He arrived in Melbourne in June 1863. Clarke's literary talents quickly became apparent and by November 1863 he had been published in Melbourne Punch. After abortive attempts at working in a bank and on the land, Clarke settled down to a career combining journalism, literary writing and librarianship. This exhibition aims to provide coverage of these three facets of his life, as well as offering one or two glimpses into his private life. Clarke was always able to earn a living of sorts by his pen.

Ian McLaren has described him as 'essentially the journalist. He was able to sense a story; he was aggressive and combative, ready to translate his thoughts into arresting words that caught the imagination of the public, or aroused antagonism to his views expressed so forthrightly'.¹ He was kept busy by the Argus and Australasian, writing leaders and literary articles and reviewing books and theatre. A series of articles, 'Lower Bohemia', about Melbourne low life appeared in the Australasian and were particularly successful, being strong pieces of investigative journalism.

Clarke had also been contributing to the Australian monthly magazine, shortly to become the Colonial monthly. He became co-proprietor and editor of the Colonial monthly for a time, during which his first novel, Long odds was serialised. Clarke then moved on to become co-proprietor and editor of Humbug but, despite an impressive stable of contributors (including Henry Kendall, G.A. Walstab and Clarke himself) and satiric content, Humbug was not a financial success. Undaunted, Clarke continued to contribute to newspapers for the rest of his life.

The Yorick Club was the centre of Melbourne's bohemian literary circle in the late 1860s and 1870s. Many of Clarke's intimates were members, enthusiastic literary men who enjoyed lively debate. Some of the letters on display reflect Clarke's relationship with such men as J. J. Shillinglaw, Patrick Moloney and J.E. Neild. No doubt this atmosphere proved conducive to (among other things) Clarke's literary and journalistic efforts. However, in 1869 Clarke married Marian Dunn, a young actress. The demands of a growing family - they were to have six children - led to increasing financial pressure, probably one of the reasons why tension started to develop between husband and wife. By 1870 Clarke was forced to supplement his irregular income by taking a position at the Melbourne Public Library as Secretary to the Trustees. During his 11 year association with the library he

produced his most memorable work.

After 1870 Clarke's writing had to be done in his spare time. His prodigious output 2 demonstrates how hard he was working and goes some way to tempering his reputation as a disciple of Bacchus.³ There is no doubt he did imbibe heavily at times since there is factual evidence and not a few anecdotes to support this. ⁴ However, the quality of his work indicates that he could not have been continually inebriated. His literary work and journalism reflect a focussed approach. By way of experiment Clarke did try, at times, to write under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

In 1874 Clarke's best known work, *His natural life* was published by George Robertson. It had already been serialised in the Australian journal between 1870-72. Clarke presented a copy of the first edition to his friend J. J. Shillinglaw.

Clarke's employment at the Public Library was due in part to the good offices of Sir Redmond Barry, chairman of the Trustees. It is not clear how Clarke and Barry met or why Barry approved of Clarke (Barry was known to disapprove of fiction - when showing a visitor around the library he was asked if many works of fiction were held. 'Very few indeed sir', replied the Judge, 'and I am thankful to say that those few are being rapidly appropriated by a few unscrupulous persons, and will not be replaced.') ⁶ Barry's patience was no doubt tried by Clarke on occasion. Certainly Clarke's library work was secondary to his literary work. Nevertheless he became Sub-Librarian in 1873, a position he occupied until his death eight years later.

Henry Sheffield retired from the office of Chief Librarian in 1881. Clarke, not unreasonably, expected to obtain the position as he was next in line. His letter of application reflects this, and he was shortlisted. His anticipation led him to refuse the position of Victorian Parliamentary Librarian.

Unfortunately a number of factors conspired against him. A dispute with the Bishop of Melbourne, Dr James Moorhouse, over the place of Christianity in the modern world did not help his cause, although Clarke eventually got the better of the Bishop. Tension was rife between the Berry government and the Trustees over who had the right to appoint the new Librarian. Most significantly of all perhaps, Redmond Barry had died the previous November. Had he lived he may have supported his protégé's cause. Adding to all of this was the increasing financial strife in which Clarke found himself and which resulted in a second bankruptcy in mid-1881. Clarke had no choice but to resign. T.F. Bride was appointed Chief Librarian. The rapid combination of events combined with ill-health possibly contributed to Clarke's death on 2 August 1881.

An Australian Paean—1876

The English air is fresh and fair,
The Irish fields are green;
The bright light gleams o'er Scotland's streams,
And glows her hills between.
The hawthorn is in blossom,
And birds from every bough
Make musical the dewy spring
In April England now.

Our April bears no blossoms,
No promises of spring;
Her gifts are rain and storm and stain,
And surges lash and swing.
No budded wreath doth she bequeath,
Her tempests toss the trees;
No balmy gales—but shivered sails,
And desolated seas.

Yet still we love our April,
For it aids us to bequeath
A gift more fair than blossoms rare,
More sweet than budded wreath.
Our children's tend'rest memories
Round Austral April grow;
'Twas the month we won their freedom, boys,
Just twenty years ago.

Though Scotland has her forests,
Though Erin has her vales,
Though plentiful her harvests,
In England's sunny dales;
Yet foul amidst the fairness,
The factory chimneys smoke,
And the murmurs of the many
In their burdened bosoms choke.

We hear the children's voices
'Mid the rattle of its looms,
Crying, "Wherefore shut God's heaven

All our golden afternoons?"
Though here the English April
Nor song nor sun imparts,
Its Spring is on our children's lips,
Its summer in their hearts!

We've left the land that bore us,
Its castles and its shrines;
We've changed the cornfields and the rye
For the olives and the vines.
Yet still we have our castles,
Yet still we bow the knee;
We each enshrine a saint divine,
And her name is Liberty.

Liberty! name of warning!
Did'st thou feel our pulses beat
As we marching, moved this morning
All adown the cheering street?
In our federated freedom,
In our manliness allied,
While the badges of our labour
Were the banners of our pride.

Did our fancies speak prophetic
Of a larger league than this—
With higher aims and nobler claims
To grasp the good we miss;
When in freer federation
In a future yet to be,
Australia stands a nation
From the centre to the sea.

Cheer for Australia, comrades,
And cheer for Britain, too;
Who loves them both will not be loth
To give each land its due.
So cheer for Britain, comrades;
Our fathers loved the soil,
And the grandeur of her greatness
Is the measure of their toil.

But never let our sons forget,
Till mem'ry's self be dead,
If Britain gave us birth, my lads,
Australia gave us bread!
Then cheer for young Australia,
The empire of the Free,
Where yet a Greater Britain
The Southern Cross shall see!

Marcus Clarke

In A Lady's Album

WHAT can I write in thee, O dainty book,
About whose daintiness faint perfume lingers—
Into whose pages dainty ladies look,
And turn thy dainty leaves with daintier fingers?

Fitter my ruder muse for ruder song,
My scrawling quill to coarser paper matches;
My voice, in laughter raised too loud and long,
Is hoarse and cracked with singing tavern catches.

No melodies have I for ladies' ear,
No roundelays for jocund lads and lasses—
But only brawlings born of bitter beer,
And chorussed with the clink and clash of glasses!

So, tell thy mistress, pretty friend, for me,
I cannot do her hest, for all her frowning,
While dust and ink are but polluting thee,
And vile tobacco-smoke thy leaves embrowning.

Thou breathest purity and humble worth—
The simple jest, the light laugh following after.
I will not jar upon thy modest mirth
With harsher jest, or with less gentle laughter.

So, some poor tavern-haunter, steeped in wine,
With staggering footsteps thro' the streets returning,
Seeing, through gathering glooms, a sweet light shine
From household lamp in happy window burning,

May pause an instant in the wind and rain
To gaze on that sweet scene of love and duty,
But turns into the wild wet night again,
Lest his sad presence mar its holy beauty.

Marcus Clarke

The Song Of Tigilau

The song of Tigilau the brave,
 Sina's wild lover,
 Who across the heaving wave
 From Samoa came over:
 Came over, Sina, at the setting moon!

The moon shines round and bright;
 She, with her dark-eyed maidens at her side,
 Watches the rising tide.
 While balmy breathes the starry southern night,
 While languid heaves the lazy southern tide;
 The rising tide, O Sina, and the setting moon!

 The night is past, is past and gone,
 The moon sinks to the West,
 The sea-heart beats opprest,
 And Sina's passionate breast
Heaves like the sea, when the pale moon has gone,
Heaves like the passionate sea, Sina, left by the moon alone!

 Silver on silver sands, the rippling waters meet --
 Will he come soon?
 The rippling waters kiss her delicate feet,
 The rippling waters, lispings low and sweet,
 Ripple with the tide,
 The rising tide,
 The rising tide, O Sina, and the setting moon!

 He comes! -- her lover!
 Tigilau, the son of Tui Viti.
 Her maidens round her hover,
 The rising waves her white feet cover.
 O Tigilau, son of Tui Viti,
 Through the mellow dusk thy proas glide,
 So soon!
 So soon by the rising tide,
The rising tide, my Sina, and the setting moon!

 The mooring-poles are left,

The whitening waves are cleft,
 By the prows of Tui Viti!
 By the sharp keels of Tui Viti!
 Broad is the sea, and deep,
 The yellow Samoans sleep,
 But they will wake and weep --
 Weep in their luxurious odorous vales,
 While the land breeze swells the sails
 Of Tui Viti!
 Tui Viti -- far upon the rising tide,
 The rising tide --
The rising tide, my Sina, beneath the setting moon!

 She has gone!
 She has fled!
 Sina!

Sina, for whom the warriors decked their shining hair,
Wreathing with pearls their bosoms brown and bare,
Flinging beneath her dainty feet
Mats crimson with the feathers of the parrakeet.

 Ho, Samoans! rouse your warriors full soon,
 For Sina is across the rippling wave,
 With Tigilau, the bold and brave.
 Far, far upon the rising tide!
 Far upon the rising tide!

Far upon the rising tide, Sina, beneath the setting moon.

The Wail Of The Waiter

All day long, at Scott's or Menzies', I await the gorging crowd,
Panting, penned within a pantry, with the blowflies humming loud,
There at seven in the morning do I count my daily cash,
While the home-returning reveller calls for 'soda and a dash'.
And the weary hansom-cabbies set the blinking squatters down,
Who, all night, in savage freedom, have been 'knocking round the town'.
Soon the breakfast gong resounding bids the festive meal begin,
And, with appetites like demons, come the gentle public in.
'Toast and butter!' 'Eggs and coffee!' 'Waiter, mutton cops for four!'
'Flatheads!' 'Ham!' 'Beef!' 'Where's the mustard?' 'Steak and onions!' 'Shut the door!'

Here sits bandicoot, the broker, eating in a desperate hurry,
Scowling at his left-hand neighbour, Cornstalk from the Upper Murray,
Who with brandy-nose enpurpled, and with blue lips cracked and dry,
In incipient delirium shoves the eggspoon in his eye.
'Bloater paste!' 'Some tender steak, sir?' 'Here, confound you, where's my chop?'
'Waiter!' 'Yessir!' 'Waiter!' 'Yessir!!' - running till I'm fit to drop.
Then at lunch time - fearful crisis! In by shoals the gorgers pour,
Gobbling, crunching, swilling, munching - ten times hungrier than before.
'Glass of porter!' 'Ale for me, John!' 'Where's my stick?' 'And where's my hat!'
'Oxtal soup!' 'I asked for curry!' 'Cold boiled beef, and cut it fat!'
'Irish stew!' 'Some pickled cabbage!' 'What, no beans?' 'Bring me some pork!'
'Soup, sir?' 'Yes. You grinning idiot, can I eat it with a FORK?'
'Take care, waiter!' 'Beg your pardon.' 'Curse you, have you two left legs?'

'I asked for bread an hour ago, sir!' 'Now then, have you laid those eggs?'
'Sherry!' 'No, I called for beer - of all the fools I ever saw!'
'Waiter!' 'Yessir!' 'WAITER!!' 'Here, sir!' 'Damme, sir, this steak is RAW!'
Thus amid this hideous Babel do I live the livelong day,
While my memory is going, and my hair is turing grey.
All my soul is slowly melting, all my brain is softening fast,
And I know that I'll be taken to the Yarr bend at last.
For at night from fitful slumbers I awaken with a start,
Murmuring of steak and onions, babbling of apple-tart.
While to me the Poet's cloudland a gigantic kitchen seems,
And those mislaid table-napkins haunt me even in my dreams
Is this right? - Ye sages tell me! - Does a man live but to eat?
Is there nothing worth enjoying but one's miserable meat?
Is the mightiest task of genius but to swallow buttered beans,

And has man but been created to demolish pork and greens?
Is there no unfed Hereafter, where the round of chewing stops?
Is the atmosphere of heaven clammy with perpetual chops?
Do the friends of Mr Naylor sup on spirit-reared cow-heel?
Can the great Alexis Soyer really say 'Soyez tranquille?'
Or must I bring spirit beefsteak grilled in spirit regions hotter
For the spirit delectation of some spiritual squatter?
Shall I in a spirit kitchen hear the spirit blowflies humming,
Calming spiritual stomachs with a spiritual 'Coming!'?
Shall - but this is idle chatter, I have got my work to do.
'WAITER!!' 'Yessir.' 'Wake up, stupid! Boiled calves' feet for Number Two!'

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