

Classic Poetry Series

Marie E J Pitt
- poems -

Publication Date:
2004

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

Marie E J Pitt(1869 - 1948)

Marie E.J. Pitt poet, socialist, feminist, ecologist and anarchist was born at Bullumwaal - a gold mining town north of the Gippsland town of Bairnsdale in 1869. From there the family took up a small selection at Wy Yung. Her formative years were spent in and around Bairnsdale and Wy-Yung. Pitt later recalled how her upbringing influenced her later politics; "Having only a bush school education, I was naturally thrown on my own resources a great deal, and because of this I am absolutely independent in thought, and belong to no particular school of thought."

In 1893 she married and followed her husband, a miner, to various mining camps on the west coast of Tasmania. In a brief article on Pitt John Adams noted; "As a woman amongst so many men, she began to become extremely interested in women's rights and became well known for her views on the subject."² She was active in workers politics and was elected Vice President of the Workers Political League at Mathinna. In 1905 she returned to Melbourne and became immersed in a number of social and political movements. She was closely associated with the Victorian Socialist Party at this time and editor of their journal *The Socialist*.

In 1911 *Horses of the Hills*, her first book of poetry, was published. In 1925 *The Poems of Marie E.J. Pitt* appeared and in 1944 the *Selected Poems of Marie* was issued. Her poetry falls into two fairly distinct types - the romantic and somewhat nostalgic lyrical ballad and the angry and sometimes bitter political poems. Whilst the former poems have dated badly (in *Hail and Fairwell* (1971) Chester Eagle mocked the ballad Bairnsdale for its 'archaic sentimentality' the latter are often as valid as when they were penned. The poem "Women : a reply" expressed her concerns for equality of women. "Doherty's Corner" expresses her concern for the environment "There's no bush today at Doherty's Corner, Only strange green hills and the glint of a far bay... "with a tinge of melancholy and regret.

One reviewer of the 1924 volume spoke of her work in glowing terms; "Few Australian poets have a wider appeal than Marie E.J. Pitt. Her passionate love of nature and of her native country is reflected in all her writings. For rhythmic quality and graceful construction her verse compares more than favourably with that of most other Australian writers..."

However conservative novelist and short story writer Hal Porter was more concerned about her politics than her ballads. In his book *Bairnsdale*(1977) he noted: "her batch of very melodious and regret tinged lyrics about Bairnsdale

had endeared her to those who would have reeled back in dismay from her politics and her way of life had they known about them".

In later years she lived in a de facto relationship with poet and parliamentary draftsman Bernard O'Dowd. Pitt seems to have had differing opinions with O'Dowd over a number of issues including World War 1 on which she took a strong pacifist line. This opinion is strongly reflected in her anti-war poem "The Mercy" which questioned the glory of war and attacked the hallowed icons of both Gallipoli and the Anzac. She wrote:

"Oh, was it dream, or was it trance,
or was it I was there
And saw Hell's host of devils dance
on bloody Sari Bair?"

This poem was published in her 1925 collection Both Pitt and O'Dowd were strong supporters of the Unitarian church from the 1920s onwards. But as a Christian her view of Jesus was that of

"Christ the Anarchist with fearless heart of youth,
Who laid his manhood down to keep the gates of truth!"

Many of her political poems are concerned with workers rights. Since she was both the daughter and the wife of working miners and since she lived both her childhood and much of her adult life in a state of poverty or near poverty this is quite understandable. Thus such poems as "The Heathen of Today", "Anathema" and "The Enslavement" are good examples of this genre. But perhaps the best example of her stinging sometimes bitter politically oriented verse and her concern for workers rights is "The Keening". In this poem she begins: "We are the women and children Of the men that ruined for gold,Husbands and sons and brothers Slain for the yellow dross." There follows direct attacks on:- the state and statesmen as "Traitors and false that pander to the spillers of human life,..", capitalists as the "fat blasphemers Whose poppet heads mock the sky." and the organised church "Ye who whimper of patience, Who slay with a looselipped lie..."

"The Keening" ends defiantly:

"We are the women and children
Of the men that ye mowed like wheat;
Some of us slave for a pittance -
Some of us walk the street;
Bodies and souls, ye have scourged us;

Ye have winnowed us flesh from bone:
But, by the God you have flouted,
We will come again for our own. " /

Marie Pitt died in 1948 and in that year a small brass bas relief was unveiled in the Bairnsdale library by her companion Bernard O'dowd. Aside from this small monument which still hangs in the foyer of the library and the hard to get slim volumes of poetry there is little left of the legacy of Marie Pitt.

A Gallop Of Fire

When the north wind moans thro' the blind creek courses
And revels with harsh, hot sand,
I loose the horses, the wild red horses,
I loose the horses, the mad, red horses,
And terror is on the land.

With prophetic murmur the hills are humming,
The forest-kings bend and blow;
With hoofs of brass on the baked earth strumming,
O brave red horses, they hear us coming,
And the legions of death lean low.

O'er the wooded height, and the sandy hollow
Where the boles to the axe have rung,
Tho' they fly the foreman as flies the swallow,
The fierce red horses, my horses, follow
With flanks to the faint earth flung.

Or with frenzied hieroglyphs, fear embossing
Night's sable horizon bars,
Thro' tangled mazes of death-darts crossing,
I swing my leaders and watch them tossing
Their red manes against the stars.

But when South winds sob in the drowned creek courses
And whisper to hard wet sand,
I hold the horses, the spent red horses,
I hold the horses, the tired red horses,
And silence is on the land.

Yea, the South wind sobs among the drowned creek courses
For sorrows no man shall bind---
Ah, God! For the horses, the black plumed horses,
Dear God! For the horses, Death's own pale horses,
That raced in the tracks behind.

Marie E J Pitt

Ballad Of Autumn

DOWN harvest headlands the fairy host
Of the poppy banners have flashed and fled,
The lilies have faded like ghost and ghost,
The ripe rose rots in the garden bed.
The grain is garnered, the blooms are shed,
Convolvulus springs on the snowdrop's bier,
In her stranded gold is the silver thread
Of the first grey hair i' the head o' the year.

Like an arrant knave from a bootless boast,
The fire-wind back to his North has sped
To harry the manes of a haunted coast
On a far sea-rim where the stars are dead.
Wistful the welkin with wordless dread,
Mournful the uplands, all ashen sere—
Sad for the snow on a beauteous head—
For the first grey hair i' the head o' the year.

Time trysts with Death at the finger-post,
Where the broken issues of life are wed—
Intone no dirges, fill up the toast
To the troops that trip it with silent tread,
Merry we'll make it tho' skies be lead,
And March-wind's moan be a minstrel drear—
A truce to trouble!—we'll drink instead
To the first grey hair i' the head o' the year.

South Esk sings on where the furze-fires spread,
But we'll mourn no more as of old, my dear,
When gorse flames golden and briars flush red
With the first grey hair i' the head o' the year.

Marie E J Pitt

Evil

NOT Beelzebub, but white archangel, I
Turn the dim glass and shift the sands again,
And touch the eyelids of the sons of men
Lest they forget—forget and drowsy lie
In Fate's unfurrowed fallow till they die—
As seed that quickens not for dawns that leap
From out the dark of immemorial years,
With kiss of wind and sun and wizard tears
Of fugitive clouds to wake them from their sleep.
With milestones I have set the crumbling sod
Of human judgement that they stray not wide,
Nor languish lost in labyrinths alway;
And smile in pity when I hear them pray
That Wrong's rude whips from them be turned aside,
Who call me Evil—not discerning God.

Marie E J Pitt

Hamilton

WILD and wet, and windy wet falls the night on Hamilton,
Hamilton that seaward looks unto the setting sun,
Lady of the patient face, lifted everlastingly,
Veiled and hushed and mystical as a cloistered nun.

O the days, the cruel days creeping over Hamilton
Like a train of haggard ghosts, homeless and accursed,
Moaning for a fleet o' dream silver-sailed and wonderful,
Moaning for a sorrow's sake, the fairest and the first.

O the moon, the lonely moon, leaning low on Hamilton,
Thro' the years that sunder us the dead come back, come back,
Scent of white eucupha stars blown on winds of Memory,
Glint and gleam of fagus gold adown the torrent's track.

Half my heart is buried there, buried high on Hamilton,
Lonely is the sepulchre with never stone for sign,
Where the nodding myrtle-plumes stand like sable sentinels
And the ruddy rimony wreathes the hooded pine.

Half my heart is yearning yet, yearning yet for Hamilton,
Hamilton beyond the surge of sobbing Southern main,
O the croon of wistful winds calling, calling, calling me,
Where the mottled mountain thrush is singing in the rain.

We shall ne'er go back again, back again to Hamilton,
Heart o' me, our track is toward the heart of burning day,
Hills beyond the call of hills beaconing and beckoning—
Westward, westward winds the track, a thread of dusky grey.

Marie E J Pitt