

Classic Poetry Series

William Pember Reeves
- poems -

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William Pember Reeves(1857 - 1932)

William Pember Reeves

New Zealand statesman, lawgiver and poet

Ask most New Zealanders if they know who William Pember Reeves is and the reply is likely to be "Never heard of him", yet this politician was a major influence in New Zealand politics in the 1880s and 1890s and in 1896 was appointed agent general for New Zealand in the United Kingdom, and is also one of New Zealand's better-known early poets. Allen Curnow in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* fittingly describes him as New Zealand's first eminent statesman and law giver, and her first native-born poet worth the name.

William Pember Reeves' father, William Reeves, was a politician and a newspaper editor. After working in a bank and becoming a member of the London Stock Exchange he and his wife Ellen Pember emigrated to New Zealand in 1857 and settled in Canterbury. He worked as a customs clerk, farmed at Rangiora, managed Charles Torlesse's run at Fernside, and then bought a share in the *Lyttelton Times*, became manager and later editor.

He entered politics in 1867, but was not an outstanding politician, and his career successes came in his role as editor of the *Lyttelton Times*. From covering the concerns of the Canterbury province in the 1870s it expanded its focus and became the voice of liberal thinkers and politicians.

William Pember Reeves' schooling

William Pember Reeves was born in 1857, and was sent to boarding school at a preparatory school for Christ's College when he was five years old. When his family moved into the town of Christchurch he was a day pupil at the Presbyterian High School and then at Christ's College. He was a very successful student in all subjects except mathematics and won school and provincial government scholarships and an entrance scholarship for the University of New Zealand in Classics, English, French, German and history.

In 1874 he sailed to England to study law at Oxford, like his uncle, William Pember, but a breakdown in health caused him to give up this plan and return to New Zealand. Work as a cadet on a farm in mid-Canterbury improved his health and he moved back to Christchurch and worked in a law firm, which led to his being admitted to the Bar in 1880.

Early career and marriage

He wrote up Christchurch Supreme Court cases for the New Zealand law reports for two years but law did not really attract him and he began to write political comment for the Lyttelton Times and became its parliamentary correspondent.

In 1885 he was appointed editor of his father's weekly paper, The Canterbury Times.

In that same year he married Magdalene (Maud) Stuart Robison. Her father, William Smoult Robison was a Christchurch bank manager. The couple had two daughters, Amber born in 1887 and Beryl born in 1889. Later in 1895 they had a son called Fabian.

1887 saw his first active involvement in politics. He fought for a railway to link Christchurch with Nelson and the West Coast. He founded the Canterbury Electors' Association to support the Stout-Vogel government in the 1887 election and push for the suggested railway.

This group was not without opposition. The opponents of the Government set up the Political Reform Association and Reeves presented this conflict as a clash between capitalists and working people. This was rather an exaggeration, but it gave him an opportunity to demonstrate his speaking skills which impressed Julius Vogel.

Elected to Parliament

Reeves stood for the seat of St Albans and was elected, but the Stout-Vogel government was defeated and Robert Stout lost his seat. When Vogel returned to England the following year the party now becoming known as the Liberals had lost both its leaders. Reeves found being on the opposition benches a frustrating experience.

Socialist views expressed

Writing he found more satisfying. In 1889 he became editor of the Lyttelton Times, and under his editorship it became a widely read voice of Liberal views. Under the pseudonym, Pharos, he wrote articles for the paper on socialism and communism. These were published in pamphlet form in 1890, the first writing published on that subject in New Zealand. He showed his wide reading on the subject in his discussion of utopias from Plato onward, and it was clear that he was not writing just a historical account, but that he was strongly influenced by socialism. The writings which most influenced his thinking were by Ferdinand LaSalle and the English Fabian socialists. He was impressed by their belief that increased socialist support for the people should come gradually and as a

parliamentary process.

New Zealand had suffered a long depression in the 1880s. This had encouraged radical thinking, and the trade unions were calling for factory legislation. Word was spreading of the 'sweated' labour conditions in clothing factories in Dunedin. Land reformers called for a tax on land.

Satirical and romantic poetry

Reeves also began writing poetry and short stories. The Lyttelton Times Company published a book of poems under the title, *Colonial couplets*, being poems in partnership by Reeves and G. P. Williams. Williams wrote amusing verse, Reeves wrote political satire and also romantic verse. Critics today vary in their estimation of Reeves's poetry, but the buying public of the day approved and bought up two editions of the poems.

Government minister

In the election of 1891 Ballance's Liberal Party won on promises of labour and land reforms. Reeves as a Liberal candidate won his seat comfortably and was listed third in the new cabinet. He was to be Minister of Education and Minister of Justice. In 1892 he had a further portfolio, as minister of labour. He was said to be the first Minister of Labour in the British Empire.

He resigned from his position as editor of *The Lyttelton Times*. His father died shortly after and left his estate virtually bankrupt. The family no longer had any control over the newspaper.

As Minister of Education

In his education portfolio Reeves instituted changes in the structure and quality of primary teaching. He worked hard to get a uniform system for standards of education and for teachers' salaries. He took a keen interest in Maori schools, visiting a number of them. He was especially interested in improving the teaching of English. He expressed satisfaction over a 10% increase in the attendance of Maori schoolchildren in the mid 1890s.

He wished to provide free secondary schooling for those who could not afford the fees, but decided that it was too expensive a measure and postponed it. If he had tried to institute it he would have had little support from the other members of the Cabinet.

As Minister of Labour After three years struggling to get the upper house, the Legislative Council, to pass his bills Reeves succeeded with the Industrial

Conciliation and Arbitration Act, 1894. This bill introduced compulsory arbitration in industrial disputes - probably the first such provision in the world. This measure sought to facilitate the settlement of disputes and encourage the formation of Industrial Unions and Associations.

This act was to be the dominant influence in New Zealand's industrial relations for the next seventy nine years.

Other significant labour legislation passed while Reeves was Minister of Labour:

Truck Act 1891

This forced employers to pay wages in cash and give up the practice of paying wages in kind.

Shipping and Seamen's Amendment Act 1894

This cut down penalties for breaches in discipline, improved sanitary provisions, and set the proportion of skilled seamen necessary in ships at sea.

Factories Act 1894

This decreed that no children under fourteen were to be employed, and children under fifteen could be employed only if they had passed an education test. The maximum hours to be worked by women and children was forty eight hours per week.

Establishment of Department of Labour

This organisation sent inspectors into factories to see that the Factories Act was being obeyed.

Shops and Shop-assistants Act 1894

Reeves had to face much opposition before this act was passed, but it had a huge impact on New Zealand shopping hours resulting in the closure of almost all shops from midday on Saturday until Monday morning.

Support for land reforms

Reeves used his powerful speaking skills to support John McKenzie's land reforms which aimed to break up the large estates.

In his political decisions Reeves was strongly influenced by his socialist sympathies.

Death of Ballance in 1893 and Seddon's leadership

After Ballance died Richard John Seddon became Prime Minister. Friction between Reeves and Seddon who wanted the labour legislation to be slowed down in 1895 was probably one factor behind the offer to Reeves of his next appointment.

New Zealand

GOD girt her about with the surges
And winds of the masterless deep,
Whose tumult uprouses and urges
Quick billows to sparkle and leap;
He filled from the life of their motion
Her nostrils with breath of the sea,
And gave her afar in the ocean
A citadel free.

Her never the fever-mist shrouding,
Nor drought of the desert may blight,
Nor pall of dun smoke overclouding
Vast cities of clamorous night,
But the voice of abundance of waters,
Cold rivers that stay not or sleep,
Greets children, the sons and the daughters
Of light and the deep.

Lo! here where each league hath its fountains
In isles of deep fern and tall pine,
And breezes snow-cooled on the mountains,
Or keen from the limitless brine,
See men to the battlefield pressing
To conquer one foe—the stern soil,
Their kingship in labour expressing,
Their lordship in toil.

Though young they are heirs of the ages,
Though few they are freemen and peers,
Plain workers—yet sure of the wages
Slow Destiny pays with the years.
Though least they and latest their nation,
Yet this they have won without sword—
That Woman with Man shall have station,
And Labour be lord.

The winds of the sea and high heaven
Speed pure to her kissed by the foam;
The steeds of her ocean undriven,

Unbitted and riderless roam,
And clear from her lamp newly lighted
Shall stream o'er the billows upcurled
A light as of wrongs at length righted,
Of hope to the world.

William Pember Reeves