

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Dowell O'Reilly**  
**- poems -**

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# Dowell O'Reilly(18 July 1865 - 5 November 1923)

Dowell Philip O'Reilly was an Australian poet, short story writer and politician.

O'Reilly was born at Sydney. His father, Rev. Thomas O'Reilly, was a well known clergyman of the Church of England, who came of a family with many military and naval associations. Dowell was the son of his second marriage, to a Miss Smith who came from a well-educated and artistic family. Dowell O'Reilly was educated at Sydney Grammar School, and when his father died he assisted his mother in keeping a preparatory school for boys at Parramatta. In 1884 O'Reilly published a small volume, *Australian Poems*, and in 1888 a larger volume of verse, *A Pedlar's Pack*. Both books are now extremely rare. It has been stated that the author destroyed most of the copies of the second volume in his disappointment at its lack of success.

## <b>Political Career</b>

In 1894 O'Reilly was elected a member of the Legislative Assembly for Parramatta and sat for four years. He moved the first motion in favour of women's suffrage carried in the New South Wales parliament, but was defeated at the 1898 election. He became a master at his old school, the Sydney Grammar School, and continued there for 11 years. In 1910 he again stood for Parramatta, this time as a Labor candidate with the encouragement of Billy Hughes, but was defeated, and shortly afterwards obtained a position in the Sydney land tax branch of the Commonwealth Treasury. In 1913, Hughes asked O'Reilly about the views of his brother-in-law, Albert Piddington, on states' rights. O'Reilly cabled Piddington to clarify this, and as a result of Piddington's reply, "In sympathy with supremacy of Commonwealth powers", Hughes appointed him to the Australian High Court. As a result of opposition to his appointment and his belief that he was compromised by the exchange of cables he resigned without sitting in court.

In 1913 O'Reilly published *Tears and Triumph*, an expanded short story rather than a novel, in which O'Reilly shows a penetrating knowledge of the feminine view-point. It is a tragic little story, simply and beautifully told, with a running commentary by the author on the philosophy of sex, and it is unique in Australian literature.

In 1895, O'Reilly married Eleanor McCulloch and there were three children of the marriage. During his wife's illness, which lasted for many years, O'Reilly had a difficult and lonely life, which was brightened by a correspondence with a cousin

in England whom he had met when she was a child. His father had taken him on a visit to Europe when he was 14. His cousin was too young at the time to have any memory of him, but after the death of O'Reilly's wife in August 1914, the letters gradually developed into love-letters and in June 1917 they were married. Their letters were collected, and published in 1927 under the title of Dowell O'Reilly From his Letters, an illuminating revelation of his interesting personality. In 1920 O'Reilly made a small collection of his short stories from the Sydney Bulletin and other periodicals, and published them under the name of Five Corners. He died after a short illness of cerebrovascular disease and pneumonia at Leura in the Blue Mountains. He was survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter, afterwards Mrs Eleanor Dark, a leading Australian novelist.

### **<b>Legacy</b>**

O'Reilly was remembered as witty, kindly, generously tolerant, and sensitive. Though he did not feel challenged by his work as a schoolmaster, he had a good understanding of boys and gained their affection. Not long before his death he wrote of himself: "I am a failure; I have attempted many things, writing, teaching, politics, drifted along, done just enough to live." This feeling of frustration and failure was characteristic. His early verse was seldom of more than average quality, but the little selection published in 1924 with Tears and Triumph and Five Corners, under the title of The Prose and Verse of Dowell O'Reilly, shows him to be a poet, however limited in output and scope. Five Corners contains some of the best Australian short stories ever written. "His Photo on the wall" is considered a masterpiece for its mingling of humour and tragedy, and his beautiful little sketch, "Twilight" is a triumph in economy of means. O'Reilly wrote so little perhaps because of his tendency towards self-criticism. He was known as a perfectionist.

# Australia

WHAT can we give in return  
For her beauty and mystery  
Of flowering forest, infinite plain,  
Deep sky and distant mountain-chain,  
And her triumphant sea,  
Thundering old songs of liberty?

Love—steadfast as her stars,  
And passionate as her sun,  
And joyous as the winds, that fling  
The golden petals of her spring  
By gully, spur, and run,  
On dreaming age, and little one:

Courage—when courage fails  
In the blind smoke and pain  
Of raging fire, and lurid sky,  
And dumb thirst-driven agony—  
Till river and creek again  
Swirl seaward through the teeming rain.

Faith—wild flower of the soul,  
Thrilling the breathless night  
With fragrance, and the desolate ways  
Where silence fears to whisper praise,  
With radiant delight  
Of wonder—worship in God's sight.

Duty—O great white stars,  
And glorious red cross, shine  
On victory, when, rushing forth  
Against the peril of the North,  
Australia's battle-line  
Flings out Trafalgar's deathless sign.

Dowell O'Reilly

# Faith, Love And Death

GREY dawn—and lucent star that slowly paled  
Beyond the breaking splendour of the years,  
When boyhood's heart looked up to heaven, through tears  
Of joy, to see the glory of God unveiled:

High noon—and bridal earth, whose footsteps failed  
For very love—when passionate hopes and fears  
Dazzled the flowers, made music in the ears,  
And through the trancéd wood their splendour trailed.

Calm eventide—afar the lonely west  
Dreams of the wondrous day, and dreaming, lies  
With folded hands, still lips, and weary eyes  
Searching the shadows of eternal rest:

Childhood, and youth, and age—for each a prize,  
Faith—Love—and Death—I know not which is best.

Dowell O'Reilly

# Sea Grief

Along the serried coast the Southerly raves,  
Grey birds scream landward through the distance hoar,  
And, swinging from the dim confounded shore,  
The everlasting boom of broken waves

Like muffled thunder rolls about the graves  
Of all the wonder-lands and lives of yore,  
Whose bones asunder bleach for evermore,  
In sobbing chasms and under choking caves:

O breaking heart—whose only rest is rage,  
White tossing arms, and lips that kiss and part  
In lonely dreams of love's wild ecstasy,

Not the mean earth thy suffering can assuage  
Nor highest heaven fulfil thy hungry heart,  
O fair full-bosomed passionate weeping sea.

Dowell O'Reilly

# Stars

Wild eyes—and faces ashen grey  
That strain through lofty prison bars  
To see the everlasting stars,  
Then turn—to slumber as we may:

Even as we are, so are they,  
And here is peace for all who know  
The stars still follow where we go,  
When heaven and earth have passed away.

Obedient to the Unknown Power,  
From out the ruin of a world  
A clustered galaxy is hurled  
To glimmer through its steadfast hour:

The blazing sun of Shakespeare's soul  
Shattered to star-dust, fills again  
With meteor-flights the immortal brain  
That seeks a yet more splendid goal;

And still a voice—that now is ours—  
Repeats for aye the unknown word  
That thrilled the heart of beast and bird,  
Ere man had learned to love the flowers.

Dowell O'Reilly

# The Sea-Maiden

Like summer waves on sands of snow,  
Soft ringlets clasp her neck and brow,  
And wandering breezes kiss away  
A threaded light of glimmering spray,  
That drifts and floats and softly flies  
In a golden mist about her eyes.  
Her laugh is fresh as foam that springs  
Through tumbling shells and shining things,  
And where the gleaming margin dries  
Is heard the music of her sighs.  
Her gentle bosom ebbs and swells  
With the tide of life that deeply wells  
From a throbbing heart that loves to break  
In the tempest of love for love's sweet sake.  
O, the fragrance of earth, and the song of the sea,  
And the light of the heavens, are only three  
Of the thousand glories that Love can trace,  
In her life, and her soul, and her beautiful face.

This tangled weed of poesy,  
Torn from the heart of a stormy sea,  
I fling upon the love divine  
Of her, who fills this heart of mine.

Dowell O'Reilly