

Classic Poetry Series

William Gay
- poems -

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William Gay(1812 - 1897)

William Gay was born in Bratton, Devonshire on 25 Feb 1812.

In 1834 he joined the crew of "Medway" as a carpenter and worked his way to Hobart where he arrived 21 July 1835. For the next eighteen months he stayed with the ship as it plied between Sydney and Hobart, eventually leaving the ship in Hobart on 26 January 1836. He had tried to convince his girlfriend in England to come to Australia and marry him but her father would not allow it. So William settled for a local girl and on 1 May 1838 he married Mary Ann Elizabeth Mansfield at St John's Newtown, Tasmania.

Mary Ann Elizabeth Mansfield was a daughter of William Mansfield, a convict who came out on the convict ship "Calcutta" which provided the settlers and convicts to establish the settlement at Sorrento, Victoria in 1803 and then Hobart in 1804. He was married to Maria, daughter of Elizabeth Cole, a First Fleeter, and James Tucker, a Second Fleeter, and hangman on Norfolk Island.

Mary gave birth to 5 sons, the last one being stillborn. Eleven months after the last birth, on 13 August 1848, Mary died having never really recovered from the birth.

William left Hobart early in 1851, taking with him his three oldest boys and leaving the youngest, Silas, with his late wife's parents in Hobart. For five months he scrounged work in Melbourne and then set sail for Portland in "Red Rover". He worked there for another five months during which time he took part in a spirited political debate in the Portland Guardian. Most of the debate was conducted in the form of poetry.

By the end of 1851 William was lured by the stories of the Gold Rush and on 2 December 1851 he set off in the company of his boys and three other men he set off for Ballarat where they arrived nine days later. They worked claims at Golden Point and other fields for some years and were present at the meeting at Bakery Hill when the diggers burnt their licenses in defiance of the authorities, an act which preceded the Eureka Rebellion. During this time William made a trip back to Hobart to collect Silas.

It would appear that the family stayed around the Ballarat area for some years. There is evidence to suggest that William spent some time in Gippsland, perhaps as a contractor for the railways. His last few years were spent in the Armidale area of NSW where he still indulged in some prospecting and plenty of political comment. His eldest son, John Wesley, appears to have settled there.

William wrote many poems during his time in the Colonies. He had opinions on politicians, the Irish, deserted wives, the clergy, education, child rearing and many other subjects. His sympathies lay with the workers and he had little time for the 'Establishment'. He never remarried and was proud of his achievement in rearing four sons single handed.

A Sonnet Of Battle

RELUCTANT Morn, whose meagre radiance lies
With doubtful glimmer on the farthest hills,
How long shall men, reiterant of their ills,
With peevish invocation bid thee rise
To burn to noontide glory in the skies
That now a gloom perplexed and starless fills,
And seek from thee and not their own strong wills
That perfect good which is not bought with sighs?
Why weep and wait for thee, though laggard, Morn,
With all thy joys of love and peace and light?
For us the mightier joy that rives the soul,
When, slaves no longer to a day unborn,
Our flag of war along the dark we unroll
For fell encounter with the hosts of Night.

William Gay

A Sonnet Of Faith

I am not daunted by the show of things,
Nor do I pass them with averted eyes,
Feigning I do not see, nor on the wings
Of fair deluding fancy lightly rise
And from afar the radiant world behold
In happy silence spinning smoothly by.
Nay, but by night and day, in heat and cold,
Among the multitudes who toil and die
I come and go observant, near at hand,
10Regarding Life with eyes that do not shrink:
I see the victor on his carrion stand,
And see in impious blood the vanquished sink,
Yea, even behold where waits the delvèd sod,
Yet sing unfaltering of the soul and God.

William Gay

Australia 1894

SHE sits a queen whom none shall dare despoil,
Her crown the sun, her guard the vigilant sea,
And round her throne are gathered, stalwart, free,
A people proud, yet stooping to the soil,
Patient to swell her greatness with their toil,
And swift to leave, should dire occasion be,
The mine, the flock, the desk, the furrowed lea,
And force the invader to a dark recoil.—
Yet as she gazes o'er the plains that lie
Fruitful about her throne, she sighs full sore
To see the barriers Greed has builded high,
Dividing them who brothers were before,
When still they dwelt beneath a sterner sky
And heard the thunders of a wilder shore.

William Gay

Australia Infelix

HOW long, O Lord, shall this, my country, be
A nation of the dead? How long shall they
Who seek their own and live but for the day,
My country hinder from her destiny?
Around me, Lord, I seem again to see
That ancient valley where the dry bones lay,
And 'tis in vain that long I wait and pray
To see them rise to men resolved and free.
Yet sure, O Lord, upon this land of death
At last Thy Spirit will descend with power;
And Thou wilt kindle patriots with Thy breath,
Who, venturing all to win their country's good,
Shall toil and suffer for the sacred hour
That brings the fullness of her nationhood.

William Gay

Australian Federation

FROM all division let our land be free,
For God has made her one: complete she lies
Within the unbroken circle of the skies,
And round her indivisible the sea
Breaks on her single shore; while only we,
Her foster children, bound with sacred ties
Of one dear blood, one storied enterprise,
Are negligent of her integrity.—
Her seamless garment, at great Mammon's nod,
With hands unfilial we have basely rent,
With petty variance our souls are spent,
And ancient kinship underfoot is trod:
O let us rise, united, penitent,
And be one people,—mighty, serving God!

William Gay

Dirge

Cauld, cauld she lies where snaws are deep
And bitter blows the muirland win',
And over her grave the icy stars
Are keepin' watch abune.
But braw, O braw, the blooms that deck
The grave where he that lo'ed her lies,
And saftly blows the simmer breeze,
And cloudless are the skies.

William Gay

Life From 1835 To 1851

And, now, a vacancy occurs,
For very nearly sixteen years,
In which I'd not the least desire,
To strike the harp or tune the lyre.
But having left the good old 'Medway:
I tried on shore to make some headway.
I first a situation got,
And not amiss I found my lot:-
My wages good, my work was various;
My living far above precarious.
I then began to look around,
And thought ere long to settle down:
And then a letter I wrote home,
And ask'd my love if she would come;
Offering at once to pay her passage:-
And in due time received this message:-
'I'll wait till many years are past,
If you'll say you'll come home at last;-
But can't consent to such removal,
Without my fathers full approval:
Which I'm afraid he'll never give;
But come home dear, we'll happy live.'
And, then I thought if home I went,
I could not feel the same content,
As if I'd never come away,
But work'd for half a crown a day:-
While here, I thought I'd every chance
My future prospects to advance.
And after some more serious thought:
Another letter home I wrote;-
Which now I cannot give verbatim,
Though it contain'd my ultimatum.
From her engagement I relieved her,
And I've no doubt it sorely grieved her:-
Then, married in due time I got:-
Though not my first love, still my lot.
We had our sorrows and our joys,
And in due time we had four boys;
But on the day our fifth was born,

My heart was with sad anguish torn:-
A fearful illness seiz'd my wife,
Which nearly drain'd away her life:
It was so sudden and severe;
It fill'd me with a dreadful fear.
We lost the babe; and my poor wife
Show'd very little sign of life,
For thirteen hours; then, I went near her;
And what I could, I did to cheer her:-
And in due time again she rallied:
But oh! she look'd so deathly pallid.
Her illness shook her system so;
I felt my heart o'erwhelm'd with woe.
With tender unremitting care,
Good nourishment and change of air;
Health seem'd regain'd in eleven months:-
She then relaps'd, and sunk at once.
I, and my boys were now alone:-
My wife, their mother dead and gone:-
I felt bereft of my best friend,
And almost wish'd my life would end.
But having made to God my prayer
My all committed to his care;
I begg'd He would my mind direct,
My boys to support and protect.
My God afforded me relief,
And caus'd me to assuage my grief;
And thus he gently clear'd my way;
And gave me strength to suit each day,
but as I'd other ills sustain'd;
I thought if longer I remain'd;
They might increase and break me down,
And all my future prospects drown,
For I'd borne wrongs of every quality,
Many from sanctified rascality.
So I, within a little while,
Resolv'd to quit Tasmania's Isle
And in due time I made a start,
With Drew, 'Old Hoppy' and spring-cart.
Melbourne I reach'd on that day week,
And stroll'd about some work to seek:
Though very much a job I needed;

'Twas full twelve days ere I succeeded.
Work then in Melbourne was precarious;
The jobs I got were short and various:
So when five months had just roll'd over:
Portland I reach'd in the 'Red Rover'
So here I made a five months jump
And from old deck planks made a pump.
Thus near five years of sorrow past;
I and my boys were snug at last:-
I in the shop 'mong wheels and carts;
At school and home they did their parts.
Now all this while by some mischance,
My muse on me ne'er cast a glance:
But in nine months at the election
She took me under her protection.
I really felt like one inspired.
Could spin off verse when I desired;
Which made some cynics on me frown;
And then for fun I wrote them down.
Now I've gone over sixteen years
Through joys and sorrows, smiles and tears
And as I end this tale at last,
You'll guess the future by the past.

William Gay

Love's Infinity

Dear lowly flower that liftest up
Among the grass thy golden cup,
I take thee from thy earthly bed
And plant thee in my heart instead.
Ye ocean waves that mount on high
As emulous of the lofty sky,
'Tis in my breast ye onward sweep
Which as the sea is wide and deep.
Great sun, from thy supernal height
On flower and wave who pourest light,
My soul doth clasp thee in the skies,
And thou in me dost set and rise.
O thou I love, thy lips of fire
Have waked an infinite desire,
And unto all things as to thee
Flames out the love that burns in me.

William Gay

Love's Menu: Pommes De Terre Frites

Fried potatoes is a dish
Good as any one could wish:
Cheap it is, and appetizing;
Turn a saint to gormandizing:
Good and cheap and tasty too,
Just the thing for Love's Menu.
Love is dainty, and his food,
Even though common, must be good:
Love hath little to disburse,
So his fare must fit his purse:
Love hath fickle appetite,
We his palate must invite:
Crisp and hot, the price a sou,
Fried Potatoes, Love's Menu.

William Gay

Milford Sound In Winter

Dark ocean walls, majestically steep,
That dare the skies, that guard a solitude
Of straitened sea from every tempest rude
That uncontrolled molests the outer deep!
White pinnacles, where Summer suns will reap
A silent store of clouds, unloose the flood
That captive long in Winter's hold hath stood,
And wake the mountain mosses from their sleep!
Dark walls! white peaks! unravished silences!
Grey sinuous lane of solitary sea!
Wild cataracts plunging fearless from the height!
And glaciers patient through the centuries!
O would that my revering soul might be
Among your lonely shrines an eremite!

William Gay

No My Friends No!

Hail foes to oppression, and lovers of freedom!
Your day has arrived, and your power you know:-
This host of timeservers, I'm sure we don't need them,
And we'll never support them! O! no, my friends, no!
Their dodges and shuffles, their threats and persuasions,
Their schemes and devices so petty and low,
Has made us determine on all such occasions,
That we'll never support them; O! no, my friends, no!
The victory they've lost, after all their endeavours,
To prop up their system, though now 'tis laid low:-
We were not to be Gallied ^, young Portland for ever!
We would not surrender! O! no, my friends, no!
They may try all they can with their creatures and flunkeys:-
We'll shout in derision at them as we go:-
We care not for N.T. * nor his poor abject monkeys;
And will not support them; O! no, my friends, no!
Success to our Guardian, our rights he's protected;
While his ex Reverence Sandy \$ has never done so;
Being the tool of his Party, our claims he's rejected;
And shall we support him? O! no, my friends, no!
'Tag rag and bobtail' as the 'Herald' may term us;
It's place among journals has always been low:-
Poor driveling rag, let it never concern us;
Neither let us be Byass'd +. O! no, my friends, no!
Poor plate licking dog, let him follow his master,
With fawning and wagging his tail to and fro;
Through his growl or his bark we but go ahead faster;
Then let us not blame him; O! no, my friends, no!
O, let's not forget this tenth day of September;
When they thought to o'erawe us, but it was 'no go';
We stood firm to our colors and secured our own Member;
And shall we repent it? O! no, my friends, no!
Send the news far and wide by every conveyance;
Let them know right and left that we've struck the death blow,
To the clique who kept all real good in abeyance;
But no Moore shall oppress us, O! no, my friends, no!
Praise Him by whom Princes and Kings hold their stations;
Who as Judge of the earth does exalt and bring low:
Who is ruler supreme over people and nations;

May we never forsake Him, O! no, my friends, no!
Long life to our Member! May blessings surround him,
In every direction, where e'er he may go,
And those of his foes who would wish to confound him;
May they never be able; O! no, my friends, no!

William Gay

Primroses

They shine upon my table there,
A constellation mimic sweet,
No stars in Heaven could shine more fair,
Nor Earth has beauty more complete;
And on my table there they shine,
And speak to me of things Divine.

In Heaven at first they grew, and when
God could no fairer make them, He
Did plant them by the ways of men
For all the pure in heart to see,
That each might shine upon its stem
And be a light from Him to them.

They speak of things above my verse,
Of thoughts no earthly language knows,
That loftiest Bard could ne'er rehearse,
Nor holiest prophet e'er disclose,
Which God Himself no other way
Than by a Primrose could convey.

William Gay

Resurge

Come forth, O Man, from darkness into light,
Renounce the dust, break through thy sordid bars,
For ever leave the crawling shapes of Night,
And move erect among thy native stars:
No longer grovel in a foetid cell
When all the spaces of the sky are thine,
With Sloth and Want no more a beggar dwell
When thou canst claim a heritage divine;
Awake and live! nor dream the dreams of death
That brood, fantastic, fearful, o'er thy grave,
Thou art not of the stuff that perisheth,
Nor unto Fate and Time art thou a slave;
Thy power extends beyond the starry Pole,
And worlds and suns revolve within thy soul.

William Gay

Storm

I love not when the oily seas
Heave huge and slow beneath the sun,
When decks are hot, and dead the breeze,
And wits are dropping one by one.
But when the South wind fiercely breaks
His frozen bonds and rushes forth
Across the roaring sea and shakes
His icy spear against the North;
When breakers thunder on the lee,
When timbers crash and sails are rent,
When wild and louder grows the sea,
And black the reeling firmament;
O then at last my soul awakes,
A thousand joys within her rise,
And all the bounds of sense she breaks
To soar exulting through the skies.
I love not when my ship of Fate
Glides on before some fragrant breeze,
And slowly tracks with costly freight
The sapphire deeps of prosperous seas.
But when beneath the sky of death
She staggers through the seas of pain,
When passion's hot tempestuous breath
Through shroud and tackle shrieks amain,
When deepening glooms the day o'erwhelm,
And all is one wild wreck of form,
O then resolved I grasp the helm
And proudly guide her through the storm.

William Gay

The Crazy World

THE WORLD did say to me,
'My bread thou shalt not eat,
I have no place for thee
In house nor field nor street.

'I have on land nor sea
For thee nor home nor bread,
I scarce can give to thee
A grave when thou art dead.'

'O crazy World,' said I,
'What is it thou canst give,
Which wanting, I must die,
Or having, I shall live?

'When thou thy all hast spent,
And all thy harvests cease,
I still have nutriment
That groweth by decrease.

'Thy streets will pass away,
Thy towers of steel be rust,
Thy heights to plains decay,
Thyself be wandering dust;

'But I go ever on
From prime to endless prime,
I sit on Being's throne,
A lord o'er space and time.

'Then, crazy World,' said I,
'What is it thou canst give,
Which wanting, I must die,
Or having, I shall live?'

William Gay

The Ex Official's Lament

Alas alas! my power is gone;
I thought 'twould last for ever;
But now 'tis over, I must own,
They've done it very clever.
I could have feather'd well my nest,
If I had been permitted;
To that intent I did my best,
To have my friend acquitted.
'Congratulatory address'
I also did procure him.
Among my influential class
And thought this must secure him.
In fact, I left no means untried,
To smother up the matter,
And on my influence relied,
To stop the diggers' chatter.
But rumours soon got spread about,
Of this our camp proceeding;
And very soon we all found out,
That discontent was breeding.
At last, the diggers on the place,
Determined to assemble:-
Which, when I saw I must confess;
I inwardly did tremble.
And yet to awe the vulgar crowd,
I got the troopers round me;
When groans and hisses long and loud,
Completely did confound me.
My brethren then with all their might,
Endeavoured to allay them:-
When lo! it rose to such a height;
No speech of ours could stay them.
I, always thought the common herd
Should render blind submission:-
Should ne'er have once presumed or dared
To question our decision.
But, now they talk about their 'rights',
As much as their superiors:-
Though 'Gentlemen' I'm certain quite,

All view them as inferiors.
Could we but get them down once more,
We'd hold them in such fetters,
As would restrain them evermore,
From meddling with their betters.
But, now, alas! I see no way,
To gratify my wishes:-
With all our schemes we've lost the day,
For getting loaves and fishes.
Intelligence is gaining ground,
We can hold out no longer:-
Where'er I cast my eyes around,
The 'league' is getting stronger.
Left to our fate, we can but grieve,
To see their ranks increasing:
Oh! could we have have a short reprieve,
The diggers to be fleecing.

William Gay

The Singer

Nay! sing no more thy wild delusive strain
(I heard them say, while I my song pursued),
'Tis but the rage of thy delirious brain
(I heard them say, yet still my song renewed):
Nay! sing no more with reckless, idle breath
Of man immortal and of life to come,
For one brief moment scan the face of death,
Then be thy foolish song for ever dumb;
Behold the dusty ash that once was fire,
And mark the summer leaf in autumn fall,
Watch thou the wavering breath of man expire,
And know that Death hath lordship over all
(I heard them say with many a scornful word,
Yet still sang on as one who nothing heard).

William Gay

The Sorrowful Fate Of Bartholomew Jones

Bartholemew Jones made his money in mines,
And although he has left us his fame still shines
As a man who was knowing in various lines.
It wasn't his line to write or to spell,
To teach or to preach, to dig or to fell,
But to handle his shares, and to keep out of hell.
He knelt every day at the foot of the Throne
(To use his own words), yet he wore (it was known)
His garments of grace o'er a heart made of stone.
And when Death would no longer concede a respite,
He hied straight away to the regions of light,
As a man of whom no one could question the right.
He wandered for long o'er the pavements of gold,
Saw wonders and glories around him unfold,
But somehow all seemed to him dismal and cold.
He tired of the sun's everlasting rays,
Grew sick of the harps and the hymns and the praise,
And drooped in the glare of the glittering ways.
'If this be the heaven I laboured to win,
I'd better have taken full measure of sin,'
He moaned to the angel who first let him in.
Said the angel, while looking to bolt and to bar,
'I fear, sir, you're somewhat mistaken so far,
But this is the hell where the hypocrites are.'

William Gay

The War Of The Ghosts

Three Ghosts that haunt me have I,
Three Ghosts in my soul that fight,
Three grandsire Ghosts in my soul,
That haunt me by day and by night.

The first was a dark mountaineer,
Who hunted with arrow and knife,
To whom the turf was a bed,
And the wind of the moorland was life.
And the next was a mariner rude,
Whose home and whose grave was the sea,
For whom the land was a prison
And only the ocean was free.
And the last was a shrunken recluse,
Who lived with the dust and the gloom
And wrote of the Saints and of Him
Who went for us to His doom.

And all through the days and years
These ancient Ghosts contend,
And my soul is a battle-field
Of passions that pierce and rend.
And whenever a sunbeam alights
All gleaming and fresh on my page,
I am wild for the hills and the bush,
I am torn with the hunter's rage.
I am sick of the smell of a book,
I am off with the dogs or a gun,
Or I gallop my fifty miles
Before the set of the sun.
And yet from some loftier peak
When I look on the sea from afar,
I feel like one in a grave;
And I long for a ship full-sailed
And an ocean wide on the lee
I choke on the solid land
For the lift of the undulant sea.

Yet ever the battle goes on,

And ever there rises a day
When the Ghosts of the wave and the wood
To the Ghost of the cell give way.
Then the land is a wilderness drear,
And dismal and vast is the sea,
But cloistered in peace with my books
My soul is uplifted and free.

Three Ghosts that haunt me have I,
Three Ghosts in my soul that fight,
Three grandsire Ghosts in my soul,
That haunt me by day and by night.
Yet ofttimes there joins in the fray
One gross and sluggish of limb,
No spectre is he but a man,
Whose strokes are heavy and grim.
For a man is not nothing, I swear,
Nor a braggart am I when I boast
That though he be slothful or sleep,
A man is more than a ghost.
And my soul is my own, I aver,
The master and lord of it I,
And whenever I will to bestir,
All ghostly usurpers shall fly.
Then I what is mine will assume,
Nor diverge from the path of my will.
Though the Ghosts I have routed still call
From the desk and the sea and the hill.

William Gay

To A Nurse

As dropping moisture on December flowers,
As sunlight breaking o'er the August plain,
As shines the Virgin on the midnight hours,
So is thy presence at the bed of pain;
5And as the flowers revive to bloom more fair,
And o'er the plain the wattles burst in fire,
And midnight hours to morn at last repair,
So hope and life thy minist'rings inspire;
9And though for me there's but the life and hope
That lie abundant past the gates of Death,
Yet thither as with feeble steps I grope
Thy friendly arm assists my failing breath;
Nor will I deem of Providence the worse
Who sent me pain to send me thee for nurse.

William Gay

To M.

IF in the summer of thy bright regard
For one brief season these poor Rhymes shall live
I ask no more, nor think my fate too hard
If other eyes but wintry looks should give;
Nor will I grieve though what I here have writ
O'er burdened Time should drop among the ways,
And to the unremembering dust commit
Beyond the praise and blame of other days:
The song doth pass, but I who sing, remain,
I pluck from Death's own heart a life more deep,
And as the Spring, that dies not, in her train
Doth scatter blossoms for the Winds to reap,
So I, immortal, as I fare along,
Will strew my path with mortal flowers of song.

William Gay

Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum

O steep and rugged Life, whose harsh ascent
Slopes blindly upward through the bitter night!
They say that on thy summit, high in light,
Sweet rest awaits the climber, travel-spent;
But I, alas, with dusty garments rent,
With fainting heart and failing limbs and sight,
Can see no glimmer of the shining height,
And vainly list, with body forward bent,
To catch athwart the gloom one wandering note
Of those glad anthems which (they say) are sung
When one emerges from the mists below:
But though, O Life, thy summit be remote
And all thy stony path with darkness hung,
Yet ever upward through the night I go.

William Gay