

Two Centuries of Australian Poetry



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Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Two Centuries of Australian Poetry. Introduced and Selected by Katherine Bell. A Murray David Production. Smithfield, N.S.W.; Gary Allen, 2007. 224 pages. Illustrated.

Australia has yet to be considered to be one of the great contributors when assessing English language poetry. This cannot be just because England and the United States have several times Australia's population. Ireland, with less than a quarter of Australia's population, is a giant in the poetic world. Australia's greatest cultural achievements are in music, film and painting and in all three Australia punches above its weight, to use a crude and clichéd but accurate term. Even so, an examination of two hundred years of Australia's English language poetry, shows wide variety in style and topic matter and many very worthwhile pieces amongst this fairly comprehensive collection of over two hundred and thirty works by nearly sixty poets. As these figures suggest, nobody dominates through over supply. Surprisingly, but with some relief, Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson get eleven works combined. Others get one or two poems included, but many of these deserve the recognition they get here. Most of the classics are here, 'Waltzing Matilda,' 'My Country,' 'The Last of His Tribe,' 'Beach Burial,' 'The Man From Snowy River,' 'Around the Boree Log,' 'The Lights of Cobb and Co,' 'South of My Days,' and 'Terra Australis.' Not everything worthwhile can be included but some surprising omissions occur. Perhaps this must be done as some of the omitted favourites are in almost every anthology. These omissions include 'Clancy of the Overflow,' 'Five Visions of Captain Cook,' 'Scots of the Riverina,' 'No More Boomerang' and anything at all by Kath Walker or Max Harris. On the other hand we are spared the overrated 'You Find it Ugly, I Find it Lovely.' Beloved by developers, industrialists, builders of jerry-built flats, graffiti artists and assorted vandals, hoons and philistines of all stripes the title gets all too frequently quoted as a smug justification for their self-serving acts.

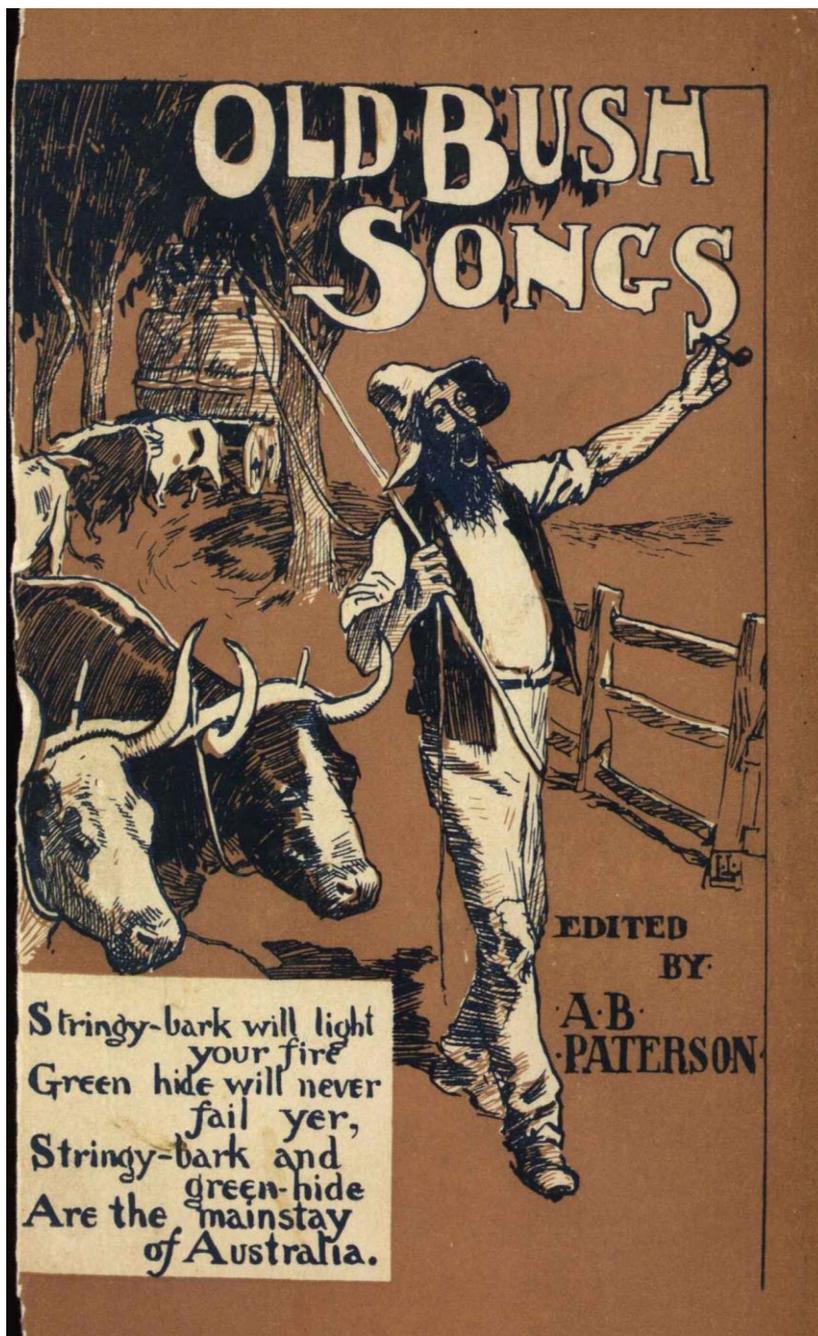
Not all included poems are wonderful, but they serve a purpose. 'No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest' is a 1940s wartime piece that shows how badly poetry can fare as propaganda. 'The Kangaroo' is so ridiculously bad it is funny and could be used as an example of how to write the worst poem in history. When a grandiose paean is composed for a species, pompous comparisons to Greek mythology cannot be far off. When Biblical references are mixed in and are applied to kangaroos, kitsch must develop, but the preposterous rhymes go beyond kitsch into something more hysterically funny than many of the intentionally comic pieces.

The collection is arranged chronologically, from the early convict days up to the late 1980s and all aspects of Australian life are covered, convicts, gold miners, squatters, bushrangers, shearers, city dwellers, sailors and soldiers, the suburban dwellers, the migrants and the outcasts. Several of the poems are tastefully

illustrated in different forms, tinted photographs and watercolours are the most common.

This worthwhile collection captures the development of Australian poetry and the variety within it.

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One of the early collections. Public Domain