

NINETEENTH-CENTURY POETRY OFTEN PRESENTED NATIONAL AND SOCIAL ASPIRATION AND A STRONG SENSE OF OCCASION. CHRIS TIFFIN EXPLORES THE PUBLIC RHETORIC IN FRYER'S COLLECTION OF EARLY QUEENSLAND VERSE.

A part from 'Waltzing Matilda',¹ probably the best-known early Queensland poems are Mary Hannay Foott's 'Where the pelican builds her nest' and George Essex Evans's 'The women of the west'. Both speak of exploration and dangerous rural expansion involving loss and disappointment. Both at least hint at the woman's role in the establishment of pastoral and agricultural industries. But while Foott's poem stops at the plangent sense of frustrated love and personal loss occasioned by the disappearance and presumed death of the explorers, Evans's poem concludes as a memorial to the previously unsung heroism of pioneer women who accompanied their men out west at the cost of their comfort, society, beauty and health.

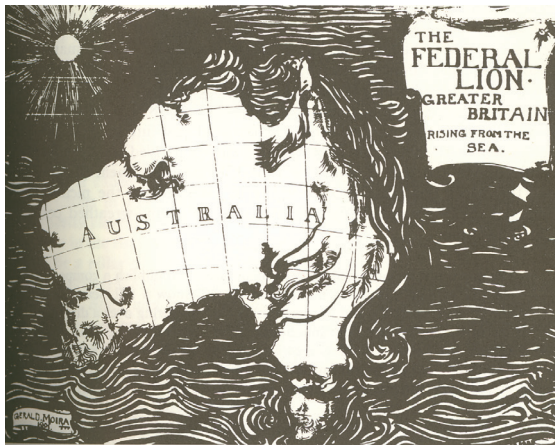
*For them no trumpet sounds the call, no poet
plies his arts—
They only hear the beating of their gallant,
loving hearts.
But they have sung with silent lives the song all
songs above—
The holiness of sacrifice, the dignity of love.²*

This tendency to step onto the platform—to write the grand ceremonial poem—is surprisingly widespread in early Queensland poetry. While there is no shortage of religious or sentimental lyrics deriving from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Romanticism, there is also extensive profession of municipal, colonial and national aspiration couched in biblical, classical or heraldic symbolism. The poetry belongs to the same genre as the national anthem, 'Advance Australia fair', which was composed in Sydney in the 1870s by Peter Dodds McCormick, a Scotsman who had emigrated in 1855. The full version of that anthem contains the themes that echo through early Queensland poetry in attesting an immense exploitable natural resource, the might and courage of British naval power, a dedication to work for the international standing of Australia, welcome to future (British) settlers, and determination to show 'British' courage in defending Australia. Not all of these themes are evident in the one (or occasionally two) verses that are used for public events today, so it is instructive to revisit the whole poem. English cricket supporters might well taunt, 'God save YOUR gracious Queen', when the song adopted for the Australian national anthem contains the lines: 'Her sons in fair Australia's land / Still keep a British soul'.³

EARLY QUEENSLAND PUBLIC POETS



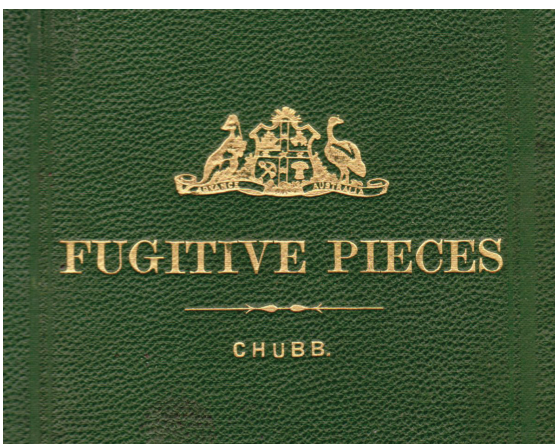
Above: George Essex Evans contemplates the future of a federated Australia. Fryer Library. George Essex Evans. Papers. UQFL13, Box 4, Photograph 1



Above: *Federated Australia as a reborn Britain. From Black & White, 23 February 1901, p. 247*

answer can be found in the celebratory references to Britain as the island fortress which had defied invasion since William the Conqueror. Britain is addressed as 'Steeled in thine ocean fortress, / Walled by the surging seas'⁴ or protected by 'The fortress waves that gird the Sea-King's home'.⁵ It is not a large step from associating that defensive insularity with Australia's, and seeing Australia as the new Britain in the South Seas, as the illustration shows. So, 'Advance Australia fair's' 'girt by sea' is actually a reminder of Australia's connections to Britain, both its divinely-provided sea defences, and its continuing dependence on Britain's naval power.

Nineteenth-century Queensland poetry throws light on the most puzzling line in our national anthem: 'Our home is girt by sea'. The problem is not, as the wags have suggested, 'Who is Gert?', but rather what the line is doing there in a catalogue of the natural attributes of the country. The previous line referred to 'golden soil and wealth for toil'; does this one refer perhaps to a future fishing industry? The



Above: *Despite Frederick Chubb's unassuming title, Fugitive Pieces, the Australian crest on the cover of his book suggests the public nature of his verse*

in 1877. He helped form the Ipswich Agricultural Show Society, served as a churchwarden at St Paul's Anglican church, and was on the committee of the School of Arts.⁷ While there are a range of poems in Chubb's oeuvre, his mainstay seems to have been writing Prologues for plays, pageants and public events in his home town. The visit of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, in February 1868, occasioned a welcome full of gravitas, sense of occasion and patriotism:

*'Tis left to thee to tell in Britain's isle
The glorious realm she has beyond the sea
What faithful hearts shout praises to her name;
What untill'd fields await her people's strength
To gild with golden ear and blossom as her rose.*

[. . .]

*O Noble Prince, whose advent to these shores
Marks a bright epoch in Australia's history,
We, but a handful of thy mother's subjects,*

*Here give thee welcome.*⁸

Which, strained as the verse may be, was a decidedly better welcome than the Prince received in Sydney where an Irishman, Henry James O'Farrell, tried to assassinate him during a picnic at Clontarf. Shot in the back from very close range, the Prince was saved only by the 'brass-and-india-rubber crossovers of his fireman's braces'.⁹

Chubb's 'Ode to Sir George Bowen' has five stanzas. The first one describes the land as pregnant with untapped wealth:

these shores

*Where nature wild her untold stores
Of wealth has buried; where teeming mines,
With sparkling gems, yet hidden from the gaze
Of man's quick searching vision, dwell in vain;
Where glorious sunshine darts alone her rays
On fallow ground unblest'd with yellow grain.*¹⁰

The final image of the sun's rays being inadequate because they do not yet encounter a comparable gold of wheat shows the ingenuity with which the heraldic material could be reworked. The remaining stanzas attest to Bowen's advance reputation as a good governor, and hope for wisdom and justice in his rule, but not before some waspish mentions of the previous misadministration of the colony from Sydney. The colony has been 'pent up unkindly by . . . dubious nurses from an uncouth school' but with Bowen's arrival the 'tyranny shall cease'.

Mary Hannay Foott was not as keen as Chubb on these public poems, but she tried her hand at a couple, the most occasional of which was a congratulatory poem from Queensland to New South Wales on the latter's centenary, 26 January 1888. The themes of the poem are NSW's demographic and agricultural expansion, the slave-free and democratic history of its colonial labour, and the development of education and medicine symbolised in its university and hospitals. Much of the later rhetoric of the British Commonwealth (as opposed to the Empire) when Britain was recast as 'oldest among equals' among the former colonies, is anticipated in the final Swinburnian stanza:

*Joy be with thee, O our Sister! We thy kin are
glad with thee
For the greatness of thy Present—for the glory
that shall be
When the Noblest of the Nations—SHE we all
alike hold dear—
Calls thee not alone her DAUGHTER, but for
evermore her PEER.*¹¹

Foott also had grand visions for Australia which was to acquire her regalia of empire and become a generous alms mistress for the 'outcast starvelings' of the Old World. Again Foott takes satisfaction in the fact that white Australia has been slave-free, but a point of extraordinary sensitivity emerges on another aspect of the labour force:

If there be ever so base a foe

As to speak of a time-cleansed stain—
To say, 'She was cradled long ago,
'Mid clank of the convict's chain,'

Ask—as the taunt in his teeth is hurled—
'What lineage sprang SHE from
Who was Empress, once of the Pagan World
And the Queen of Christendom?'¹²

Celebratory poetry is not perhaps a place where one might expect to find dispassionate historical analysis, but the breathtaking non sequitur of these stanzas still surprises. Foott doesn't deny the convict heritage, but declares that only the lowest of Australia's enemies would ever mention it since it has now been 'cleansed' by time. Should a base enemy (an English cricket supporter, perhaps?) utter the slur, the suggested counterattack is to demand the genesis of Rome which, having dominated the pagan world, went on to become the seat of Christendom at least until the Reformation. The genesis referred to, of course, is the myth of Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome being suckled by a she-wolf. The effectiveness of this retort would lie in its unexpectedness. The base taunter would be so bemused trying to comprehend what on earth Rome had to do with Australia that he might forget about the convicts altogether. Clearly, there are some things that celebratory poems do less well than others.

Early Queensland's most prolific writer of public verses was George Essex Evans, farmer, journalist, government publicist and Toowoomba-region Registrar of births, deaths and marriages. Evans had arrived in Australia from England in 1881 and within a couple of years was publishing poems about 'Greater Britain', Charles Dilke's term for what would eventually become the British Commonwealth. Evans celebrated many levels of Anglo-Saxon union and governance with poems on Toowoomba, The University of Queensland, federated Australia, London, and the British Empire. In 1901, he won a £50 prize for an ode celebrating newly federated Australia. He believed that another of his patriotic poems, 'A federal song' had earlier played a role in the campaign for Federation, and Alfred Deakin apparently agreed, for on Evans's death he eulogised him as a 'national poet whose patriotic songs stirred her people profoundly in the arduous campaign for union.'¹³ Essex Evans was very clever at deploying the iconography of patriotism. In 'A federal song' he asks, 'Can we break the land asunder God hath girdled with the sea?'¹⁴ With its faint echo of the marriage ceremony's 'what God hath joined together let no man put asunder' the line annexes Australia's insular geography as an indication that Federation is part of the divine plan. By making the place an island, God showed he wants the colonies to federate into one nation. As with Mary Hannay Foott's reference to the 'convict stain' it is hard to argue against logic like that.

Evans's 'Queensland University ode' was written in 1906 soon after the decision was taken to found the University, so his poem is less about an actual

institution with its staff and students than about the idea of a university and its influence in the community. In a society whose besetting sin is an isolationist and feckless complacency, Evans sees the role of the University as inculcating an extensive set of civic virtues.

What makes a Nation? Not its millions vast,
But the stern mould in which its sons are cast;
Not idle boastings of a strength untried;
Not license crowned and liberty denied;
But reverence, knowledge, minds that will not swerve,
The brains to rule, but first the hearts to serve;
A people courteous, disciplined, discreet,
Temperate in victory, patient in defeat.¹⁵

There was certainly more politico-visionary poetry of this sort written in the early days of Queensland than there is now. Tastes inevitably change, of course, but there are probably some specific reasons for its pervasiveness in earlier days. In the first place, verse and oral recitation played a much more prominent part in entertainment than they do now, and people's tolerance for a highly ornate and formal style of speech was much greater. But a more important reason was that there was a profound sense in the young colony of being raw and lacking taste and ideas. Patriotic poetry was an attempt both to practise a form of civilised behaviour and to explore ideas of civics and national planning. When Essex Evans deplored the colony's being 'careless of Nature's dower, / And living solely for the passing hour',¹⁶ and hoped for an improvement through the clear ideas, up-to-date information, and mental strength that the new University would foster, he was articulating goals that are hardly out-dated, even if the appropriate forms of rhetoric seem so different today.

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References

- 1 Now known to have been written at Dagworth Station near Winton by AB Paterson in 1895. Curiously in view of its later success, Paterson seems never to have regarded the poem very highly.
- 2 *The collected verse of G Essex Evans*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1928, p. 3.
- 3 'Advance Australia fair'. This line was not in the original version of the song but was introduced about the time of Federation. The National Library displays both the 1879 and 190[?] versions of the sheet music at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.mus-an24220024> and <http://nla.gov.au/nla.mus-an6012195> respectively.
- 4 GE Evans, 'Queensland to Britain', *The collected verse*, p. 243.
- 5 GE Evans, 'The crown of empire', *The collected verse*, p. 28.
- 6 Bowen actually arrived in December 1859.
- 7 G Harrison, ed. *Jubilee history of Ipswich: a record of municipal, industrial and social progress*. Diddams, Brisbane, 1910.
- 8 CF Chubb, 'Prologue', *Fugitive pieces, prologues &c*, Warwick & Sapsford, Brisbane, 1881, pp. 80-1.
- 9 R Travers, *The phantom Fenians of New South Wales*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW, 1986, p. 20.
- 10 *Fugitive pieces*, p. [9].
- 11 MH Foott, 'Queensland to New South Wales', *Morna Lee and other poems*, Gordon & Gotch, London & Brisbane, 1890, p. 24.
- 12 'The future of Australia', *Morna Lee*, p. 19.
- 13 Quoted F McKinnon, 'Introduction', GE Evans, *The collected verse of G Essex Evans*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1928, p. [v].
- 14 'A federal song', *The collected verse*, p. 7.
- 15 'Queensland University ode', *The collected verse*, p. 247.
- 16 *Ibid.*