

The Fleet And Convoy and Other Verses.

McCrae, George Gordon (1833-1927)

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Photo by

George Gordon McCrae

Mina Moore

Foreword

The only confraternity of literary men of any importance known to Australia was to be found in Melbourne in the 'sixties. it included Adam Lindsay Gordon, Marcus Clarke, Henry Clarence Kendall, and George Gordon McCrae, of whom the last alone remains with us.

They met at the Yorick Club in Melbourne, where they were never guilty of talking shop, and also at their homes where they recited, corrected and discussed their literary productions. That must have been an interesting occasion when Adam Lindsay Gordon recited one of our author's. The late Dr. Patrick Moloney used to say it was the golden age of Australian literature, and our author has many letters and notes of that interesting decade. Mr. McCrae has lived an interesting life in the Mauritius and the Seychelles Islands, as well as in England and Australia, and has gathered fruit from all these countries, as well as from the pages of history for his work. He has known and corresponded with many well-known People, and is still a contributor to several of our Australian journals. He has a particular admiration for the literature and people of France.

It will be seen from these verses, which are most of them of recent date, that his muse is still young and beautiful, and in years to come, we believe that he will ever be regarded as one of the most charming of our literary pioneers.

O. E. P.

The Fleet And Convoy and Other Verses

The Fleet And Convoy

BOOM of engines, pulse of screw,
Foam flakes scattering o'er the blue;
Castled bridge and smoke stacks three,
Boats to windward and to lee,
White, uplifted o'er the sea.

Ashen sides and snowy rail
Mark the curling smoke-wreath's trail,
Fading in immensity;
Masts that rake, and wireless gear,
Borne through yielding ether clear,
Float like threads of gossamer.

Other throbs and pulses, too,
Other foam-bells on the blue,
Other built-up bridges pass,
Rows of boats and ports of brass,
Raking masts and wireless gear
Cleave the ambient atmosphere;
While astern of all these trails
Swarthy drift the sea that veils
Sister'd in the rippling tide,
O'er the waking waters wide.

Two by two they're heading on,
Raking masts, no sail upon;
Boom of engines, pulse of screw,
Surging mid the foam-flecked blue,
As the rushing prows divide
The tossing waves they fling aside,

God be with them, one and all,
Rallying to their country's call;
Panting, thus, with fiery breath,
Every belted cruiser saith
Bless our red-cross flag of snow
Where'er our young crusaders go.

They pass as he stands idly here,
He in his yellow leaf and sere;
"Troopers" pass him one by one —
That second ship, it holds his son;
Say, shall he behold him more,
Shall he hail him from the shore,
When this cruel war is o'er?

They pass; the engines boom amain,
The driven surf flies off like rain;
The pennants ripple out astern,
Saint George's crosses fiercely hum,
Fire on a field of snow.

And yet 'tis nothing save a dream,
They are not here — they only seem
For him no “troopers” in review;
For him no cruisers stem the blue,
Nor masts whence Empire's engines stream.

Away! like Arabs with their tents;
Gone, and with all their armaments;
Away! and with the early dawn
He only knows the whither-drawn.

Gone! and no words of fond farewell;
Out, somewhere 'neath the moon's pale shell;
Out, slow into the clouding west,
And somewhere on the ocean's breast.
“Too sad for words. Yet well 'tis so,
We guard them from a nameless woe;
Stern need demands it at our hands,
Nor dare we question her commands.

I only know the ships have sailed,
I only grieve that I have failed.”
Thus in his yellow leaf and sere,
As leaning there against the pier,
He still saw ships pass one by one —
And ah! the ship that held his son.

The Taj

(Fragment from a poem entitled “A Rosebud from the Garden of the Taj.”)

APPROACH with reverent pilgrim feet,
Within the gateway stands the guide.
Mount toward the stars — the air is sweet,
The citron's breath on every side.

And through this hanging archway view
Yon garden-prospect past the court,
A nobler cypress avenue,
A marble path where fountains sport.

And up the path, and through the gloom
Of waving cypress, palm and pine,
That rise 'mid airs of soft perfume,
Behold yon marble minar's shrine!

Those swelling domes — those gleaming walls,
Those pillar'd pinnacles of fire,
That feathery foam which lightly falls
Or dances in the cypress spire.

One backward pace, — now! view the scene
Set in yon archway's picture-frame,
The foamy founts, the garden green,
The domes of snow with peaks aflame.

And all uplift on terraced height
Far o'er the grove, and garden trees,
One glittering galaxy of light
Play o'er the marble in the breeze.

Like Heav'n-descended cloud that broods
O'er some sun-mellowed distant peak,
Behold her bosom, through the woods
Pure as a dream of the antique.

And far beyond — around — above,
The sky's blue mantle widely spread
One peaceful atmosphere of love
Breathes o'er the garden of the dead.

Alsace-Lorraine (1870-1914).

DOWN beneath the despot's heel,
Bound and mocked and spat upon;
Prison'd close in walls of steel;
Ah! the days of sweetness gone,
Bare and bruised Alsatia lay.

Thus eight lustres passed away,
Village fathers turned to clay;
Village mothers mourned their dead;
Ate in tears their daily bread,
Bitter tears in silence shed.

Yet the sweet and sombre cloud
Charged with rolling thunders loud,
Shows a rift of heavenly blue,
With Hope, all radiant smiling through.
Past the village floats the cry,
Joffre's column's drawing nigh!

Message borne from man to man,
Joyous rolls the rataplan;
Up the hill and down the dale,
Past each windmill's pausing sail.

And oh! my children, passing sweet,
The tread of marching Frenchmen's feet;
The marching cadence of the drum,
That onward rush! They come! They come!
And Joffre plants on Mulhouse height,
In token of a well won fight,
Where once we saw the eagle soar,
Our noble France's tricolor!

'Whelmed in autumn sunshine pure,
'Neath these radiant folds secure;
Bless them Lord, and bid them soar
O'er our heads for evermore.

Thankful; here we bend the knee;
Burst the bonds of tyranny;
Pax vobiscum, children mine,
And with all beside our Rhine,
Loyal in our liberty
Pax et benedicite.

“Strasbourg” Devoillee

Paris 1870-1914.

FOUR and forty years to-day,
Other hands were here to drape
Thy noble form in woeful way,
With clinging folds of widows' crape.

And thou art noble, now as then,
Thy mourning past — we rend the veil,
Before the eyes of gods and men,
And strew the fragments to the gale.

Too soon! too soon! the “flaneurs” cry,
'Twere time when fair Alsace-Lorraine,
Shall hail our banner in her sky,
O'er Strasbourg's town — and free again.

Yet none too soon! We feel, we know
The tyrants' tottering to his fall;
While “Strasbourg” in her robes of snow,
Sits firm and smiles upon us all.

Bismark's Broken Vase, 1870.

THIS broken vase of Charlemagne;
The pieces lie upon the floor,
Thuringia, Saxony, Lorraine,
Alsace, Hanover, Aquitaine,
Nassau, — the Baltic Shore:
Bavaria, Hohenzollern's train
The tiny dukedoms, Allemagne
Gives to her peers to rule.
But, how to join these fragment States,
Whose jagged boundaries writhe and twist
With feudal rivalries and hates
And strife of individual fates
Long lost in memory's mist!
Methinks 'twere well that German blood
Should flow, and mingle on the field,
With the slain Frenchman's fiercer flood
That melts the soil to mire and mud,
This our cement shall yield,
And when the vase stands nigh entire,
With scarlet crack-marks veined like fire
We'll fill it to the brim and drink
Health to our Kaiser-Sire!

The draught shall not be wine — Ah no,
Leave wine to women and to fools,
To priests long-laden in their schools
With scruples, consciences and rules.
We'll drink no wine — Ah! no.
But fill the red-veined beaker high
With the best blood of Germany
And the yet hotter flood Lorraine
Alsace and lands beside the Seine
Poured forth in Gallia's cause.
Have not Bavaria's gallant sons
Spilled their best blood for me; for mine,
Where Prussia's arteries swelled the flood
As War's red blossom burst the bud
Beside the crimson'd Rhine.
Behold the Vase! well-nigh entire
Won for our feast 'mid murderous fire:
The rose leaves on the liquor swim
And kiss my lips as at the brim
I toast our Kaiser-Sire —

But mark me, Preuss! long past the Peace
The tie shall break; the pact shall cease
And all the spoiled, deluded States
Shall count their loss, proclaim their hates
And spurn thee, Bismarck! from their gates
And seal their souls' release.
Drink from the vase thy madd'ning fill,
Another toast 'twill ne'er contain
But crash to pieces on the floor —
Thou! to drink after Charlemagne!!

Berlin

(Lines on a platinum Napoleonic medal of 1806 found several years ago in Melbourne.)

HOW came it here, there's none to tell,
This gray old medal with its story,
Some Frenchman come to grief. Ah! well,
Mayhap once owned this bit of glory.

Bartered for bread in direst need
His lov'd possession; scorning pity,
Stern, though it made his heart to bleed;
A stranger in our Southern city.

Gold not more precious, 'twas decreed,
And platinum the impress bore,
Acclaiming an ambitious deed
Unmatched in days that went before.

The "obverse" mark; and tell me true
Whose image and whose pose is this,
The figure in the curule chair
The forelock on the brow so bare,
The vagrant breeze had turned to kiss.

Behold this man low-browed and bent,
Bad symbol of a humbled Glory,
Who 'neath the seated figure lent
Such sadness to the world-wide story.

The victor holds one sandall'd foot
Pressed down upon the bending neck
The emblem of his conquest put
To contemplate his kingdom's wreck
Ere spurning Prussia from the scene
And weep salt tears o'er lost Berlin.

Here like a Roman Emperor;
Of classic port; in classic guise,
Behold Napoleon in this chair
The light of Victory in his eyes.

And, on the neck of Prussia's King,
One arching foot, that holds him down,
Not get within the medal's ring,
The faintest semblance of a crown.

The legend-poignant, brief and terse,
One single word . . . and that "Berlin"
With figures, one, eight, nought and six
To keep a glorious memory green.

Now view the medal in reverse,
And there, you'll find four lines of story
Once given to Denon to rehearse
In worship of Napoleon's story.

Oh! grey, old storied medal, speak!
Come! tell us where that curule chair is,
And who the new Napoleon born,
To sit thereon;— it only fair is
To say whose foot, in haughty scorn
Shall press on Wilhelm's neck — this story,
Well worth the writing — make it ours
And leave the rest 'mid mists of Glory.

The Shadow Of The Crime

PILED high in air, and towering o'er the Spree
Loftier than all the loftiest of our time
Out-Eiffelling Eiffel in immensity
Soars the swart monument of Wilhelm's crime

Brazen the column, though its fort be clay
Brazen the crouching figures at its base,
The snake-wreathed capital in blaze of day
Rears on its summit a Medusa-face.

Visage so gruesome, none need hope to live,
Whose gaze, those baleful eyes in hate return
And kill the joy that Peace alone can give
And all that's good, and glad, and gentle, Spurn.

The bands that twine in spirals up the shaft
Shows burning villages and murdered maids:
And fanes storm-battered, where the gunner's craft
Played havoc 'mid those carven fretted shades.

Blank breaches in those walls! See! Gaping wide,
And altars desecrate and Christs o'erthrown
With Saints and Martyrs that for Faith had died,
To breathe and live again in sculptured stone.

Pillage, pollution, drunken orgies, hate
Grey wreck of smiling hospitable homes
With stains and fire marks of relentless fate
Alike of village roofs, and broken domes.

Wives outraged, . . . led to see their husbands shot,
Their children trampled 'neath the bloody feet
Of blear-eyed Uhlans that invade the cot
To rend and ravage; rob of all that's sweet.

And here, a column threads a mountain pass
At nervous pace, while marching in the van
A crowd of village dames and many a lass
To shield these sons of Priapus and Pan.

Next-files on files, more columns "en capote,"
Much smoke of burning villages and farms,
With blasted orchards where the shrapnel smote,
Or shrivelled in its rush, a garden's charms.

Look up, along, what mounds of mingled slain,
The sculptor's painful effort brings in view,

With far extended armies in a chain
And many a Zeppelin rolling in the blue.

And what processions slow, and sad, and long,
Of stricken widows, orphan'd girls and boys,
In one grave marching, never ending throng
And yet young urchins clasping close their toys.

Each moulded spiral bears or here or there
The over-lord's keen features, fierce or sad.
Look where you may, you'll find him everywhere,
With anxious knitted brows, more grim than glad.

And yet with unflesh'd sword, unblooded spurs,
No wounds to show, nor dented helm nor mail,
He silent sits, with stony eyes, nor stirs,
Unmoved by widows' cries or children's wall.

His monstrous column blackens all Berlin,
It's shadow spreads to lands beyond the sea
At half a globe away, it finds us here,
And, Yarra shares the darkness of the Spree.

The Spunyarn-winch

IN the tropic day, when the sun rides high,
And the spunyarn-winch is reeling,
And between the "cloths" of the awning's "fly"
A sunbeam's slyly stealing;
'Tis then I love to sit with "Sails,"
As the canvas grey he's fisting,
And with pushing "palm" the breadths he hales
While my "junk" I'm slow untwisting;

And hear him lay off by the yard and mile,
About China's wall and the syren's smile
While the spunyarn-winch is reeling
When the sea's too blue for belief, and we
Watch the dolphin squadrons reeling
As they close on the flying fish to lee,
Where his way a blind whale's feeling;
And a nautilus with a rose-red sail,
And rose-red arms a'rowing,
Cleaves the blue with a prow, clear-cut and frail
AS Old "Sails" his seam is sewing;
With much marvellous talk by the yard and mile
About China's wall and the syren's smile
While the spunyarn-winch is reeling.

Goodnight

I CLIMB the schooner's inky side,
My Love at yonder window weeps
While softly cradled in the tide
The Pole-star's breathing image sleeps.

And far on high the pale-faced moon
That cleaves her way through umbered clouds
Reigns o'er the radiant silver moon
That blazes on our masts and shrouds.

But, ah! as turns the slumbrous tide,
Our clanking windlass wakes the night
And slowly 'tween the banks we glide
And pass yon windows veiled light,

Astern the whirling eddy plays,
The molten silver from the prow
Reels rippling past — one pallid haze
Of moonlight chill enwraps me now.

And ever as recedes the shore
'Mid spires and towers all faintly grey
I seek her lamp — Alas! no more
'Tis there to cheer me on my way.

Farewell, Farewell, To-morrow's light
Will show nor trace of tow'r nor tree
Adieu for years! One last Good-night
Pray for thy sailor far at sea.

The Fisherman

HE sat and waited
Silent and alone;
The downward-dragging bait
Drawn tow'rd a stone;
The line along his finger lightly laid
As slowly drifted out
The painted cone;

Slow, where he marked the shades
Of blackened piers
Adrip with constant flow
Of briny tears,
In writhing figures dancing
Down the tide
That darkens, brightens,
Clouds again and clears.

And so the city mirror'd
In the wave
With yawning doorways, each
A giant's cave
And sleepy window-eyes
That winked and closed
Mute city of a Dream and Slumber's slave.

The Star (Pump Song)

SIX nights without no observation,
Six weary nights, and ne'er a star,
No sign of ship of any nation,
An' only God knows where we are. . . .
But, Hope . . . she's allers smilin', Johnny,
An' the mate . . . the mate . . . he's bound to find a star.
Hark at them pump-brakes, Johnny,
Clank-clank-clankin',
The rush and rouse o' water on them decks
Hark, Johnny, to them brakes,
Them pump-brakes clankin'
We're gainin' on the leak so I expex;
For Hope, she's allers . . . allers smilin', Johnny,
O'er flyin' tops'l craft and rollin' wrecks.

Sez our skipper, sez our skipper to the mate Sez 'e,
“Try long that cross-tree by the mast;”
“Aye! aye! sir!” sharply sez the mate, sez 'e,
My! there she rolls! and see the star at last!
For Hope . . . she's allers . . . allers smilin', Johnny,
An' the mate e's been and found it by the mast.
Six nights without no observation,
Six weary nights, an' ne'er a star;
But soon they'll tell us, gaily tell us, Johnny,
But soon they'll gaily tell us, where we are.
And Hope . . . brave Hope herself, she's allers smilin'
And the blessed sexton's bin and shot a star.

Meeting

THEN Mary trips across the green,
Her petticoat begins to show.
White as the rushing surges seen
Before the prow like drifted snow.

But, when her arm, she waves to me,
Her mantle struggling in the wind;
Recalls a topsail back for me
One day when Fate was more than kind.

Never Again

THE star in the sea finds a sister,
The swan crowns her mate on the lake,
And the wave where the pale moon has kissed her
Is silver once more for her sake.
But the willow that waves o'er the water,
That mirrors her image in vain,
Sighs in accents despair must have taught her
Ah! Never again

Sydney

UP, for the Orient Sun smiles through the Gate:
Without, two white-winged cruisers wheel and wait
As from the North Head's rugged profile flung,
See, jets of flying spume as pale as Hate.
The homing wave flings high her fringe of snow
Up . . . 'gainst the sombre rock and to and fro,
Sends loops of seething foam athwart the blue,
Which circling, shade the emerald undertow;
Isles, Harbour isles, rose-saffron in the sun
And many a jutting headland;— Day begun
With joyous smiles beams fondly on the bay
And all the rills and rivers as they run.
Fair cove (where once a farm) with crescent beach
Of gracious contour, gently curving reach,
Dark woods that seaward dip, with dappled shade
And sandstone ledges, in the sun that bleach
At anchor here in conscious majesty
A saucy frigate, — masts that pierce the sky
With grinning guns in tiers, and nettings white
And flags and pennant, wrinkling as they fly.

In at the bowsprit's heel, the sentinel
With beaming bayonet sloped; a sweet-toned bell
Chimes o'er the water from the waking town
Where yet another sentry cries, "All's well."

Those white-sailed boats laid over by the breeze
Plough the glad wave, past all those rocking trees
As, rolling, rush out-boom'd across the bay
The youthful Vikings of our inner seas.

And here, half-pausing, arms mid-air, a mill
And there another on that cot-crowned hill
With cottages below in steps and stairs
And bow-pot glories on each window-sill.

* * * * *

Another sun soars glorious o'er the bay,
Where now the tavern of a former day,
With generous tankard, frothing, silver-bright,
And all those boon companions? Where? Oh, say!

And where that house whose roof-tree used to ring
To music of the time when George was King
Brave songs of Braham, Incledon and Arne

That fading, o'er the starlit wave, took wing?

Lo! the fair cove half girdled by a wall
The Viceroy's keep beyond, where shadows fall
In broken breadths o'er mullion'd windows deep
As swing the creaking boughs of pine trees tall.

Islands on islands! these our isles of yore?
And forts where fortresses were none before
Our one tow'r vanish'd, glory of the Cove
Whose warm reflection glads the wave no more.

No saucy frigate all a-taunto here
But couched upon the plain of azure clear
A grey sea-dragon with her mailed brood
O'er canopied with smoke, at anchor's veer.

The Flag the same, each wav'ring pennants tail
Floats like a gossamer out thwart the rail,
Brave hearts of oak the same 'neath ribs of steel
Where prison'd steam usurps the realms of sail.

Dazed as I gaze, I pray me for the night
To dream to-morrow's Sun still beaming bright
Were standing in the Gate, between the Heads
To bring once more of other days the light.

And grant me of his grace but one day more
In Feast of Fancy by this Dear Old Shore.

An Island Statue

BUT there on Gabo, rock-ribbed and severe,
'Mid rush and tumult of opposing seas,
His noble image be it ours to rear
There on yon outpost isle that knows no tree;
There at the Cape, "the parting of ways."
Within his ken all ships that tolling pass,
Bound East or West, till merged in mist and haze,
Or lost in vapors 'neath a sky of brass.

Ships from the North and West, whose prows of steel
At his firm planted feet shall rise and dip
In salutation ere they turn to wheel
Or West, or North in passing ship by ship.

There, at the wide-flung portal of the Straits,
Whose created rollers, hoarse with loud acclaim
In sea-born thunder, rushing to their fates,
Pronounce to sea and shore his honored name.

More fitting pedestal, O lonely isle,
Than thou there it not in Australian seas.
More meet than is for Memnon on the Nile
The rock whereon he sits, with hands on knees.

Here, from thy crest, the hero shall explore
Scenes of rude labour passed, of battles fought
At odds with wind and wave 'tween shore and shore,
Of days and darkness with adventure fraught.

'Tis his alone, O grey and surge-swept isle
To crown thy height; and all the ships that pass,
Or by thy lantern's light or Day-dawn's smile,
Breasting the wave, shall bless the ardent Bass.

Bass, who stands sentinel beside the Gates
He found, and free as riding on the tide,
He gave the world the highway of the Straits,
And, radiant, flung those azure portals wide.

On Gabo be it, then, our bronze to rear.
Lesseps by the canal has pride of place,
Scanning the work that makes his title clear,
But Bass or Gabo wears another gra

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