

## PHILIP DURHAM LORIMER: 'THE ILLAWARRA POET'

Philip D. Lorimer whose verses and songs appeared in a great many provincial newspapers of NSW during the 80s and 90s of last century - and particularly in the papers of the Illawarra and Southern Highlands districts - wrote bloody awful poetry. Despite this, he managed to earn the epithet of 'Bush Poet' and to become a sufficiently pitiable figure for at least two people to make efforts to publish collections of his verse.

The eldest son of Alexander Lorimer, M.D. (garrison assistant surgeon) of the East India Company, he was born at Madras on June 3rd, 1843. He had a sister, two years his elder, called Charlotte and a younger brother named Peter. Philip was educated at the Edinburgh Academy (1854-59) and the editor of his papers, E.A. Petherick, claims he also attended the University of Edinburgh. Mysteriously, the university records (according to Cecil Hadgraft) do not mention him.

Intended for the Army, Philip sailed for Australia in his eighteenth year. He arrived early in 1861. He went first to the New England District, then to Queensland as an overlander taking cattle to the gulf country. There he caught 'Gulf Fever' early in 1866, and soon abandoned all hope of prospering and returned to NSW.

Out of his Queensland stay came the only really memorable couplet he ever penned:

Queensland: thou art a land of pest:  
From flies and fleas we ne'er can rest.

In Sydney, Lorimer wrote poems to real or imagined loves, wrote verse for the meetings of the 'Excelsior Loyal Orange Lodge' and managed to lose all the money he's been remitted from England in some "unfortunate" business dealings.

So in the 1880s he set out on his travels in NSW, up down the coast, across the ranges, to diggings, stations, homesteads and townships. He appears to have become especially friendly with the editors of country newspapers for whom he whipped up execrable verse. Most of these editors humoured Lorimer with publication. The *Southern Mail* at Mittagong, the *Advocate* at Robertson, the *Windsor Gazette*, the *Liberal* at Cootamundra (who dubbed him 'the Illawarra Poet' - presumably not wishing to own him themselves), the *Free Press* at Bowral and the *Illawarra Mercury* thus regularly inflicted Lorimer's verse on their readers.

Lorimer appears to have been slightly besotted by what he felt were the musical place names of the Illawarra, but even though he wrote a poem called 'The Bell Bird'

never seems to have been able to crack the big time like Kendall. [Kendall too appears to have had a dream run with country editors and my hunch is that his first published poem will one day be found in one of the missing first ten issues of the Illawarra Mercury.] Old Phil was also very big on waterfalls, particularly if they'd been given the names of colonial governors. And so we find a series of odes to the waterfalls Fitzroy, Belmore, Carrington and Jersey. Phil would travel for days just to look at a waterfall and he reckoned that "Belmore Falls surpass in beauty every other in New South Wales." It wasn't huge "in its splendour like the falls of the Weatherboard, or those named Fitzroy", reckoned Phil, but "Belmore is softly beautiful with a loveliness of its own."

During a stay in the Blue Mountains, Lorimer had occasion to visit Katoomba, Penrith and other places. On one of these excursions he discovered near the summit of the mountains, not far from the Zigzag, between Lithgow and Hartley, a cave. This became the place he frequently called home and was where he stored his belongings while on walkabout. It became a resting place on his journeys between Bathurst, New England, Illawarra and the Southern Districts. Because he is probably the only Australian poet to actually camp out for most of his creative period - some 20 years - Lorimer may actually deserve a reputation as Australia's only true "Bush Poet".

In 'The Cave' Lorimer began to collect some of his verses and arrange them into scrapbooks for selections and revision with a view to their future publication as "My Cave Songs and Poems". This collection, at least in the format intended, fortunately never saw the light of day. In the margins of his manuscripts he noted, and lamented, the fact that many ruthless editors had sometimes "clipped-out lines" in order to fit them into the columns in which they appeared in country newspapers. He was a sensitive soul old Phil.

Intriguingly, Phil tended to write verses about Places only after he'd visited them. At Inverell, for example, on March 28, 1895, he wrote "Illawarra" which begins:

"I know a place where my love cannot die . . ."

And in 'The Cave' at the Blue Mountains late in the same year he wrote his verses for the 'Illawarra Centenary' Celebrations. Eventually, his 'Cantata' for the centenary of Illawarra was printed in the Illawarra Mercury.

In his last years, 1895 and 1896, Phil seems to have spent a great deal of time at Fackender's farm at Unanderra. A handful of manuscript letters written at this time (and also a little later) have found their way into the Wollongong City Library Collection and they make very sad reading indeed.

For poor old Phil, who must have always seemed a little nutty, finally went as mental as anything. A Parramatta Printer called J. Button took pity on Phil in 1896 and printed off a handful of pamphlets entitled 'Gems We Know In Illawarra' comprising six or seven pieces of Phil's doggerel and sent them to Phil at Unanderra. Remarkably, a few copies have survived and one is in Wollongong Library. His letters headed "Unanderra Post Office, 3 June, 1896" and "Post Office/Unanderra 15 July, 1896" contain pitifully grateful queries about correction of proofs for this pamphlet.

An even sadder letter from the "Asylum, Macquarie St., Parramatta, 5th October 1896 reads as follows:

Dear Mr. Button,

*When you can please call to see me - I will not be allowed to go out of this until you can come and see me - so try to come soon - for I hardly know how dull I am.*

Yours truly  
Philip D. Lorimer

We know that Phil did get out of the Asylum, for there is a letter to Button headed "Walkers Hospital/ Concord, Parramatta River 19/11/86 saying "my malady is greatly getting better, though I know that I can never be the same old Phil"

*With many thanks for past favours,  
I am,  
Yours faithfully,  
Philip D. Lorimer.*

Lorimer eventually died, unmarried and interstate, of paraplegia in Rockwood Asylum on 5 November, 1897. But this was not his final ignominy.

His sister, Charlotte, had married Sir Peter Nichol Russell, a benefactor of Sydney University. She commissioned E. A. Petherick to edit a volume of Lorimer's poems and to provide a biographical introduction. This was privately printed as Philip Durham Lorimer, Songs and Verses, London, 1901, with a biographical sketch by E.A.P. Such was Petherick's reluctance to undertake the volume that he would not even append his full name to the work.

And this reluctance is on full display in Petherick's introduction. He concludes his biographical sketch with a selection of obituaries from various local newspapers and then damns poor Phil with the faintest of praise:

"The minor poet has his niche somewhere on the lower slopes of Parnassus and he may "enter in at lowly doors" where greater poets and philosophers do not gain admittance. For Lorimer there should be a place among the first fifty of the hundreds of versifiers who already have attempted to voice the spirit of the mountain ranges, the deep valleys, the forests and the streams, the broad and arid plains,— scenes of drought and flood, — the life in the township or in the back blocks, among pioneers and prospectors, diggers and swagmen, stockmen and shepherds and shearers, or in the humble homes of southern Illawarras. For this reason the present writer could not give his verdict against the publication of this little volume. There may not be a large amount of literary merit in it : the poetry may not be of a high order — whatever wit or wisdom there is in it shall not be silenced by word of mine. In the Anthologies of Australian Poetry, which may be compiled hereafter, space may perhaps be found for a stanza or two by PHILIP DURHAM LORIMER.

E. A. P.

Streatham, April 1901."

Be warned! For clearly there are dangers in writing poetry: someone might actually publish it when you're dead! And so for the sake of the memory of poor old Philip Lorimer, I will continue to inflict his verse on readers of the Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin in coming months. Look forward to 'A Walk round Bulli at Night (1895)' and other rollicking rhymes.

Joseph Davis

## SONGS &amp; VERSES

by

Philip Durham Lorimer

## The Fire at the Five Islands Farm.

How bare is the farm — since fire swept away  
Ev'ry trace of a home that had been,  
How changed is the dream — where the heart cannot stay  
Where it lingered so often to glean.  
Every tree we adored — every bend of the bough —  
That in youth covered hearts in the shade —  
In silence we wail, for the loss of them now  
Fills the heart with the woes, fire has made.

I look on the farm but I cannot gaze long  
For I miss a dear home that was there.  
A silence prevails where it once was all song  
When the home was all lovely and fair —  
How sudden the change when the eyes cannot clasp  
An old scene none can ever forget.  
But memory holds evergreen in her grasp  
An old roof where "our long ago" met.

How keenly the flames, and the winds in their sweep  
Did their work, with an eager desire  
Scarce giving alarm to arouse from their sleep,  
The tired dreamers surrounded with fire —  
So quietly on flew the flames in their stealth  
And all steadily sure of their gain  
Completing the wreck, when the most of the wealth  
Was the fire fiend's own — in its reign.

Oh! vainly I look for the willow-bough's bend,  
But the willows proved food for the fire —  
They stood as a shade, when the heart of a friend  
Said good-bye to a home with a sire,  
The "old long ago" often heard a farewell  
Uttered there — with a pang or a sigh,  
And an aged man, where his offspring now dwell,  
Often clasped a true hand with good-bye.

'Tis hard to lose all, and to see one's roof go  
In the peace and the darkness of night,  
To see our old joys ta'en away by a foe,  
By a foe — that is deadly in might.  
I look for that home — but alas! it has gone,  
That old roof that hid many a charm,  
Where many a friend hailed the face of the dawn  
As it smiled o'er the Five Islands farm.

### The Butcher Bird's Song.

I know of a song that is heard ev'rywhere  
That is soft, and is true in its tone  
Now rang in the spring — on the boughs that are there,  
To the gold, that embroiders their throne.  
At noon the bird sits, never hid from the sun,  
As it courts the bright sheen of the day  
And carols ascend when the day has begun  
To the birth of the wattle tree's spray.

The butcher bird sits in his glory alone,  
While his mate is at home in her nest,  
Her ears are in love with his rapturous tone  
As she steeps his sweet voice in her breast.  
She hears the coarse cry of the forest arise,  
But she heeds not that sound, or that call;  
For he is her king, and is all to her eyes,  
Who is monarch in song — over all.

So leaps my heart too, to that so stirring song  
As I hear it aloft in the trees;  
For soon it is caught, and is treasured along  
By mine ear, with the sweep of the breeze,  
I hear it at noon, but 'tis never beneath  
Any shade, but the love of the sun,  
For there it can sip ev'ry flower for its wreath  
For the heart of its favourite one.

I wear it in heights in my heart, as a pearl  
That is pure as a jewel can be —  
'Twas uttered as song, from a bird to unfurl  
A new dream, for my spirit to see.  
It's rich in its tone, and there's none to compete  
With the thrill, or the wildness of voice,  
As its echo dies, at the wattle-spray's feet  
Round his mate — who is queen of his choice.

### I Know of a Place

I know of a place where my love cannot die,  
In the folds of my nature it gleams;  
So tenderly kissed by the smiles of the sky  
With the sweets of my fairyland dreams  
Unknown to the sight of the world, and its press  
Where my soul slowly loiters to find  
A joy ev'ry day, or some beauty to bless  
In the wondering calms of my mind.

Ev'ry morning when there, I can breathe the new air  
As it skips from its birth on the hills;  
And can hear its song, as my own I prepare  
To the tune of the rippling rills.  
To the music sweet, as it drifts through the leaves  
On the boughs, overhead, with the breeze,  
And mingling along in its flight, it receives  
Ev'ry song at its birth from the trees.

My love cannot die, for on beauty I rest  
While my heart, she can win in return,  
For I dream of her near her beautiful breast,  
And in sleep I delightfully learn —  
How tender her touch, in the aisles of the wood,  
Where the flower is upraised by her voice;  
How her hands are full of her wonderful food,  
That is mine, as my natural choice.

As poet I sing with my thoughts without rein,  
As I look in the eyes of love;  
I am nature's child — and I sing in her strain,  
With Her God, as my Guidance above.  
She kissed me at birth, and I clung to her breast  
While I lived in the joy of her bowers —  
Till she led me here with her charms for a rest  
To the land, with her garden of flowers.

Delight is a friend if we use it aright,  
When we hold up our hearts to the sun,  
Though shades may be sought to relieve our poor sight  
Ere the half of our journey is done.  
But here, as I sit, my delight is abroad  
On its wind — every wonder to trace  
I brings to my soul, the full presence of God,  
And my joy is soon writ on my face.

And I fancy now — you may wish to know where,  
Is that place, where my love cannot die,  
Where the moments wake into hours 'neath the glare  
'Neath the dome of a beautiful sky:  
'Tis out in the wilds, in a range near the sea  
Where the slopes ever turn to the sun,  
Where the richest voice is the song in the tree,  
Ere the heat of the day is begun.

Where cedars, and oaks, and the possum wood grow,  
As companions to palms that are rare,  
Where thickets are dense, and the ev'ning's glow  
Is alive with the songs in the air.  
Where turpentine shades fall on streams that are near  
That are flowing away to the sea.  
Oh! love cannot die when there's none held so dear  
As thy name — Illawarra — to me.