

The Kangaroo and Other Poems

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All quotation marks retained as data
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The Kangaroo and Other Poems

From: First Fruits of Australian Poetry

Sydney

Barn On The Hill

1941

**FIRST FRUITS OF AUSTRALIAN
POETRY**

BOTANY-BAY FLOWERS

— “juvatque novos decerpere flores,
“Insignemque meo capiti petere inde coronam,
“Unde prius nulli velarint tempora Musae.”

LUCRETIUS, lib. I.

“Fairies use flowers for their charactery.”

SHAKESP. Merry Wives.

GOD of this Planet! for that name best fits
The purblind view, which men of this “dim spot”
Can take of THEE, the GOD Of Suns and Spheres!
What desert forests, and what barren plains,
Lie unexplor'd by European eye,
In what our Fathers call'd *the Great South Land!*
Ev'n in those tracts, which we have visited,
Tho' thousands of thy vegetable works
Have, by the hand of Science (as 'tis call'd)
Been gather'd and dissected, press'd and dried,
Till all their blood and beauty are extinct;
And nam'd in barb'rous Latin, men's surnames,
With terminations of the Roman tongue;
Yet tens of thousands have escap'd the search,
The decimation, the alive-impaling,
Nick-naming of GOD'Screatures — 'scap'd it all.
Still fewer (perhaps none) of all these Flowers
Have been by Poet sung. Poets are few,
And Botanists are many, and good cheap.

When first I landed on AUSTRALIA'S Shore,
(I neither Botanist nor Poet truly,
But less a Seeker after Facts than Truth),
A Flower gladden'd me above the rest,
Shap'd trumpet-like, which from a palmy stalk
Hung clust'ring, hyacinthine, crimson red
Melting to white. Botanic Science calls
The plant *epacris grandiflora*, gives
Its class, description, habitat, then draws
A line. The Bard of Truth would moralize
The Flower's beauty, which caught first my eye;
But, having liv'd the circle of the year,
I found (and then he'd sing in Beauty's praise)
This the sole plant that never ceas'd to bloom.
Nor here would stop: — at length first love and fair,

And fair and sweet, and sweet and constant, pall,
(Alas, for poor Humanity!) and then
The new, the pretty, and the unexpected,
Ensnare the fancy. Thus it was with me,
When first I spied the Flowret in the grass,
Which forms the subject of this humble Song,
And (treason to my wedded Flower) cried: —
Th' Australian “fringed Violet”
Shall henceforward be my pet!
Oh! had this Flow'r been seen by him
Who call'd Europa's “violets dim
Sweeter than lids of Juno's eyes,”
He had not let this touch suffice,
But had pronounc'd it (I am certain)
Of Juno's eye the “fringed curtain” —
Pick'd phrase for eye-lid, which the Poet
Has us'd elsewhere; and he will know it
Who in his dramas is well vers'd:
Vide The Tempest, Act the First. —
But I am wand'ring from my duty,
First to describe my fringe-ey'd Beauty.
'Tis then a floss-edg'd lilac Flower,
That shuts at early ev'ning's hour,
When the Sun has lost his power,
Like a Fairy's parasol
(If Fairies walk by day at all);
Or, it may quicker gain belief,
To call it her silk neckerchief,
Dropt before she blest the place
With her last night's dancing grace:
For surely Fairies haunt a land,
Where they may have the free command
Of beetles, flowers, butterflies,
Of such enchanting tints and dyes:
Not beetles black (forbidden things),
But beetles of enamel'd wings,
Or rather, coats of armour, boss'd
And studded till the ground-work's lost:
Then, for all other insects, — here
Queen Mab would have no cause to fear
For her respectable approach,
Lest she could not set up her coach.
Here's a fine grub for a coach-maker,
Good as in Fairy-land Long-Acre;
And very-long-indeed-legg'd spinners,
To make her waggon-spokes, the sinners!
And here are winged grasshoppers;

And, as to gnats for waggoners,
 We have musquitoes will suffice
 To drive her team of atomies.
 If therefore she and her regalia
 Have never yet been in Australia,
 I recommend a voyage to us,
 On board the Paper Nautilus;
 But I incline to the opinion
 That we are now in her dominion;
 For we dream all those self-same dreams,
 Which (from Mercutio) it seems
 We owe to her deliv'rancy,
 As midwife and queen faëry.
 Puck talks of putting round the earth,
 In forty minutes time, a girth:
 Ob'ron, tho' he "the groves may tread
 "Till th'eastern gate, all fiery red,
 "Open on Neptune with fair beams,
 "And turn to gold his salt green streams."
 Yet chuses he, "in silence sad,
 "To trip after the night's shade:
 "He the globe can compass soon,
 "Swifter than the wand'ring moon:"
 And Queen Titania's made to say
 That she had been in India;
 And had a mortal vot'ress there;
 As I hope too, among the Fair
 Of this young land of Shakespeare's tongue,
 That she has here: — I've else judgy'd wrong.
 Enough then of the Fairies and the Flower;
 And, as mistaking Puck I must sure have squeez'd
 The juice of that same little purple flower,
 (Why may it not, ye Botanists, be call'd
 A species of *Love in Idleness*?
 Only because perhaps Jussieu would say
 It is no violet), and dropt the liquor
 Into my sleeping eyes, to make me change
 My love, as erst Lysander did to Helen
 From Hermia: so may the Fairy King,
 Just Oberon, see good to break the spell
 With the epacris' juice, of virtuous might
 To take from eyes all error, that when next
 They wake, all this may seem a fruitless dream.
 "My heart with that but as guest-wise sojourn'd,
 "And now to this flow'r is at home return'd,
 "Thereto remain.
 " Be as thou wast wont to be;

“ See as thou wast wont to see:
“ Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower
“ Hath such force and blessed power.”

THE KANGAROO

— “Mixtumque genus, prolesque biformis.”
VIRG. Aen. vi.

KANGAROO, Kangaroo!
Thou Spirit of Australia,
That redeems from utter failure,
From perfect desolation,
And warrants the creation
Of this fifth part of the Earth,
Which would seem an after-birth,
Not conceiv'd in the Beginning
(For GOD bless'd His work at first,
And saw that it was good),
But emerg'd at the first sinning,
When the ground was therefore curst; —
And hence this barren wood!

Kangaroo, Kangaroo!
Tho' at first sight we should say,
In thy nature that there may
Contradiction be involv'd,
Yet, like discord well resolv'd,
It is quickly harmoniz'd.
Sphynx or mermaid realiz'd,
Or centaur unfabulous,
Would scarce be more prodigious,
Or Pegasus poetical,
Or hippogriff — chimeras all!
But, what Nature would compile,
Nature knows to reconcile;
And Wisdom, ever at her side,
Of all her children's justified.

She had made the squirrel fragile;
She had made the bounding hart;
But a third so strong and agile
Was beyond ev'n Nature's art;
So she join'd the former two
 In thee, Kangaroo!
To describe thee, it is hard:
Converse of the caméopard,
Which beginneth camel-wise,
But endeth of the panther size,
Thy fore half, it would appear,
Had belong'd to some “small deer,”

Such as liveth in a tree;
By thy hinder, thou should'st be
A large animal of chace,
Bounding o'er the forest's space; —
Join'd by some divine mistake,
None but Nature's hand can make —
Nature, in her wisdom's play,
On Creation's holiday.

For howsoe'er anomalous,
Thou yet art not incongruous,
Repugnant or preposterous.
Better-proportion'd animal,
More graceful or ethereal,
Was never follow'd by the hound,
With fifty steps to thy one bound.
Thou can'st not be amended: no;
Be as thou art; thou best art so.

When sooty swans are once more rare,
And duck-moles the Museum's care,
Be still the glory of this land,
Happiest Work of finest Hand!

**POEMS INCLUDED IN THE SECOND
EDITION 1823.**

ON READING THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN LORD BYRON AND MR BOWLES

Anticipation is to a young country what antiquity is to an old.

WHETHER a ship's poetic? — Bowles would own,
If here he dwelt, where Nature is prosaic,
Unpicturesque, unmusical, and where
Nature-reflecting Art is not yet born; —
A land without antiquities, with one,
And only one, poor spot of classic ground,
(That on which Cook first landed) — where, instead
Of heart-communings with ancestral relicks,
Which purge the pride while they exalt the mind,
We've nothing left us but anticipation,
Better (I grant) than utter selfishness,
Yet too o'erweening — too American;
Where's no past tense, the ign'rant present's all;
Or only great by the *All hail, hereafter!*
One foot of Future's glass should rest on Past;
Where Hist'ry is not, Prophecy is guess —
If here he dwelt, Bowles (I repeat) would own
A ship's the only poetry we see.
For, first, she brings us “news of human kind,”
Of friends and kindred, whom perchance she held
As visitors, that she might be a link,
Connecting the fond fancy of far friendship,
A few short months before, and whom she may
In a few more, perhaps, receive again.
Next is a ship poetic, forasmuch
As in this spireless city and prophane,
She is to my home-wand'ring phantasy,
With her tall anch'ring masts, a three-spir'd minster,
Vane-crown'd; her bell our only half-hour chimes.
Lastly, a ship is poetry to me,
Since piously I trust, in no long space,
Her wings will bear me from this prose-dull land.

SONNET, ON VISITING THE SPOT WHERE CAPTAIN COOK AND SIR JOSEPH BANKS FIRST LANDED IN BOTANY BAY

HERE fix the tablet. This must be the place
Where our Columbus of the South did land;
He saw the Indian village on that sand,
And on this rock first met the simple race
Of Australasia, who presum'd to face
With lance and spear his musquet. Close at hand
Is the clear stream, from which his vent'rous band
Refresh'd their ship; and thence a little space
Lies Sutherland, their shipmate; for the sound
Of Christian burial better did proclaim
Possession, than the flag, in England's name.
These were the *commelinae* Banks first found;
But where's the tree with the ship's wood-carv'd fame ?
Fix then th' Ephesian brass. 'Tis classic ground.

SONNET ON AFFIXING A TABLET TO THE MEMORY OF CAPTAIN COOK AND SIR JOSEPH BANKS AGAINST THE ROCK OF THEIR FIRST LANDING IN BOTANY BAY

I HAVE been musing what our Banks had said
And Cook, had they had second sight, that here
(Where fifty years ago the first they were
Of voyagers, whose feet did ever tread
These savage shores) — that here on this south head
Should stand an English farm-hut; and that there
On yon north shore, a barrack tow'r should peer;
Still more had they this simple Tablet read,
Erected by their own compatriots born,
Colonists here of a discordant state,
Yet big with virtues (though the flow'ry name
Which Science left it, has become a scorn
And hissing to the nations), if our Great
Be Wise and Good. So fairest Rome became!

NOTES

SHAKESPEARE. Winter's Tale.

“She is the fairies' midwife; and she comes
“Drawn with a team of little atomics —
“Her waggon-spokes made of long spinners' legs,
“The cover of the wings of grasshoppers;
“Her waggoner a small grey-coated gnat;
“Her chariot ----
“Made by the joiner squirrel, or old grub,
“Time out of mind the fairies' coach-makers.”

SHAKESP. *Romeo and Juliet*.

*It is of the order asphodeleae the arthropodium fimbriatum of Brown.

SHAKESPEARE, *Mid. Night's Dream*.

The *cygnus niger* of Juvenal is no *rara avis* in Australia; and time has here given ample proof of the *ornythorinchus paradoxus*.

This was written before the erection of St. James's Church. The other epithet will not become obsolete so soon.

The Ephesians were the first who erected brazen trophies. The Greeks and Romans preferred wood, as not perpetuating hostility.