

## 60 Classic Australian Poems

### Introduction

I love stories, both writing them and reading them. I was privileged enough to attend a primary school where we were encouraged to play with words and where poetry was very much a part of our classroom. Sometimes we would begin lessons with words from some of the great Australian poets, many of which belonged to our teachers' personal collections of poems – the ones that they really loved. We too were encouraged to collect the poems that we really loved.

Our teachers would write the poems onto the chalkboard and we would copy the words into our poetry books (combining handwriting lessons with English lessons). Sometimes the teachers would print the poems that they had carefully copied for us. We would glue the pages into our poetry books and decorate them with our own illustrations (which was often a homework task too). I kept the poems but ditched my attempts at illustrations . . . Gregory Rogers' illustrations are much better! Often we would learn the poems (that was another homework task) and at the end of the week our class would recite the week's new verse that we had memorised to perfection. Many school assemblies featured a class reciting poetry. Sometimes we would even enter competitions reciting this wonderful Australian poetry.

The ballads and poems in this book are just like very short stories written in rhyming verse. When the poets were creating these poems they were often writing to explain the life that they saw around them or that they remembered . . . a very different Australia to the one we now live in. The poets were creating word-pictures of the environment and the landscape and the people that they saw.

At the turn of the last century some of our most popular poets were employed by the major newspapers to travel around the country and report on 'life on the land'. Other poets simply travelled from town to town under their own steam and wrote of the life as they saw it in ballads and verse. Many of the poems in this collection are from those times.

- Some of the poems are funny – just try to read 'Mulga Bill's Bicycle' without giggling at the crazy antics of an over-confident person trying to learn to ride a pushbike and who ends up in the creek.
- Some of them are serious – read 'The Women of the West' or 'Pioneers' to see how much of a struggle that life was.

- Other poets such as PJ Hartigan (John O'Brien) are able to treat a serious subject like drought with humour and fun as he does in 'Said Hanrahan'.
- And some of the poems are wonderful ways of playing with words.

So Tri-  
Tri-anti-wonti-  
Triantiwontigongolope.

In this book there are poems about the land, about the animals of the bush, about life in the city and the country (and sometimes about the vast differences between them), about 'mateship' and friendship, about personalities, and I have included some simply silly funny poems.

Over the years some of these poems, like 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Hist!', have been so popular that picture book illustrators have won awards creating artwork to accompany the verse, in books of their own.

Some of the poems in this book have extra verses, or slightly different words from those we are used to. This is because many of the poems that I have chosen are in their original (or near-to-original) form, the way they were first published in the newspapers or journals. Many of these poems were written for specific publications. In many cases the poems were subsequently collated (sometimes after the poet's death) and slightly altered by editors or publishers.

Why do I like these poems and ballads? I enjoy the rhyme and the rhythm. I also like them because I can read these words and then jump into my mind and imagine what the characters were doing and I can imagine what the poet was writing about. And I enjoy the way that each poem or ballad tells a complete story of a time in Australia's recent history when the life that people lived was so very much different to the more comfortable and chaotic life that we live now – and it is a life that we must remember.

Poetry is fun. It is a wonderful way of expressing thoughts and feelings and impressions in mostly short grabs, so . . .

*Read the poems and laugh.*

*Read the poems and be moved.*

*Read the poems to recite.*

*Read the poems to enjoy.*

*Read the poems, and then why not write your own!*

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