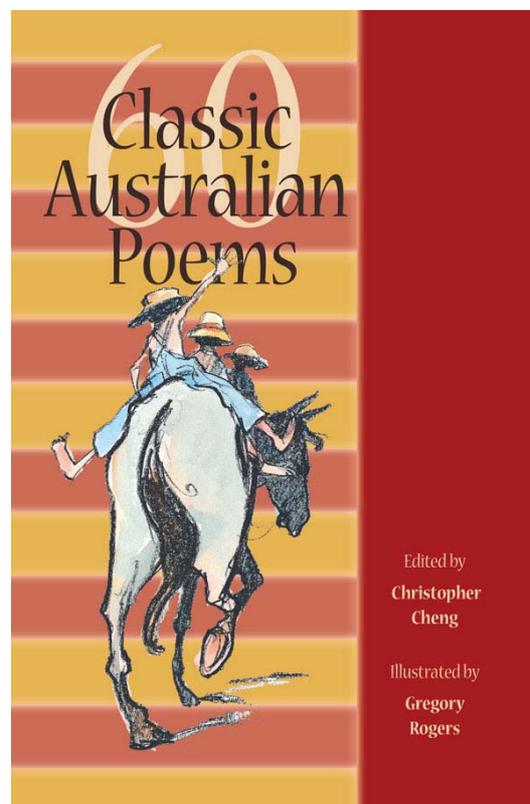# 60 CLASSIC AUSTRALIAN POEMS FOR CHILDREN

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TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

60 CLASSIC AUSTRALIAN POEMS
FOR CHILDREN
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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Australian poets have a wonderful way with words and their poems bring to life the iconic Aussie characters and unforgettable landscape that are part of our Australian heritage. Many of these – Mulga Bill, Clancy of the Overflow, The Ant Explorer, M'Dougal, The Shearer's Wife and Mr Smith – are larger than life. And the poets who created them – AB Patterson, CJ Dennis, Thomas E Spencer, Louis Esson and DH Souter – have become heroic figures in our pantheon of stars.

The sixty poems in this collection appear in their original, or near original, form and are wide-ranging in their subject matter: animals, the countryside, the struggle of bush life, early transport, sport, growing old, being young and having fun with words! But whether they are humorous, serious or playful, they are simply a joy to read!

No matter if we grew up reciting these classic poems at school, quote from them on important occasions or are meeting them for the first time, there is no doubt that these classic poems embody what it is to be Australian.

2. PRE-READING: BACKGROUND NOTES

Christopher Cheng says:

60 Classic Australian Poems was a wonderful book to compile, and many of the poems were my favorites from primary school where we would learn to recite, present and even write the poems – that was probably our handwriting lesson. It was just wonderful fun and it made words and language LIVE.

One of the additional joys of putting this collection together was finding the poems in their original or near original form in the newspaper or magazine where they first appeared. I was often distracted as I flipped through the worn pages or the microfilm by reading the headlines and other interesting facets of life in those distant times.'

I did a lot of research because even though I knew many of the poems (I did after all learn some of these in primary school) there were different versions and I was intrigued as to how the poems had changed over time.

For example, I knew of the different versions of 'Waltzing Matilda', but I wanted to know where they were different and why, and for that I needed the original copies. One of these, the Goldenia Tea version (which was sold as wrapping around a one-pound packet of tea from approximately 1895) was very difficult to find! I contacted the State Library of Queensland, who tracked down their only original for me. Obtaining a copy of that version took months and months, because it had to be photographed and then scanned.

Some poems that I remembered seemed to be different from newer editions, so I went back to magazines, newspapers and books in the libraries – I searched for the original sources. Some of the poems when they first appeared in the newspapers were handwritten and accompanied by illustrations – it is amazing to see the script that was used and the humorous images.

Of course, one of the joys of compiling this collection was spending so much time in at the State Library of NSW digging out these old poems in the newspapers and the journals. The problem was that I would uncover a poem and then start reading all the articles around it

– who was hung that week on the gallows, what the cost was for a bale of wool, decrying the activities of the politicians (some things don't change), even local 'gossip' notes. It wasn't uncommon for me to find a great poem and then read much of the newspaper, so some of this poetry collecting was a little slow.

3. NOTES ON GENRE, STRUCTURE AND STYLE

There are many different forms of poetry, including ballads, cinquains, haiku, epics, free verse, Dylan Thomas portraits, nursery rhymes, sonnets, even the lyrics to songs. Most of the poems in this collection are ballads – they tell a story and some are also set to music.

Most of these poems are written in rhyming verse and can be presented as a performance by individuals or in groups. But it is important that the poems are not studied or analysed so that the joy of the words and the poems are destroyed. Poems are often personal and may need no explanation. Students can simply explore and discuss and enjoy reading the word pictures presented.

These are simply ideas that might help begin the exploration and immersion into the delightful world of classic Australian poems.

Activity

- Many of the poems first appeared in newspapers. (The publication details are listed after each poem.) Examine these newspapers (accessible through the major city or state libraries – some are also online) to find out what was happening in the wider community when these poems were published.

4. THEMES

- Animals
- Christmas
- Death
- Drought
- The environment
- European settlement
- Families
- Friendship
- Humour
- Language
- Loneliness
- Pioneer life

5. ACTIVITIES

THE POEMS

These are general activities (based on Bloom's Taxonomy) and questions that can be applied to most of the poems featured in the book.

Remembering

- List the main characters, events and places portrayed in the poem.
- Describe the poem.
- Recite the poem.
- Identify the themes in the poem.

Understanding

- Explain the poem.
- Retell the poem in your own words.
- Illustrate what you think is the main idea.
- Create a flowchart to demonstrate the sequence of events.
- Explain the poem in narrative form.

Application

- Find and collect poems with similar themes then discuss the similarities and differences.
- Collect photos and images that show this period of time.
- Research the themes that are featured in the poem.
- Prepare a visual presentation (Keynote, PowerPoint, etc.) examining the theme today.

Creating

- Write another verse for the poem.
- Create a new poem on these themes.
- Design an instruction guide for living in the time that this poem was set.
- Create a trailer or podcast to promote the poem.
- Set the poem to music or provide a rhythmic accompaniment.

Analysis

- Dramatise the poem.
- Prepare a report about the themes of the poem.
- Write an advertisement to promote this poem.
- Discuss 'Australian-ness' and how it applies to the poem.
- Investigate the language and how it impacts the poem.
- Identify the structure of the poem and the technical devices used.
- Compare and contrast poems with similar themes, for examples Christmas ('A Bush Christmas' and 'Santa Claus in the Bush'), pioneers (the two 'Pioneers' poems) or Cobb & Co. ('The Days of Cobb & Co.' and 'The Lights of Cobb & Co.').
- Analyse the imagery portrayed in the poem.
- What does the rhyme and rhythm do to the poem?

Evaluating

- Prepare a review or opinion piece.
- Discuss with class members how his poem reflects the attitudes, values and behaviours of people during the time when this poem was set.
- Conduct a debate about *poems telling stories.*
- In groups, prepare personal reflections on the poem(s).

THE POETS

- For some of the poets much information is known, for others very little. Why would this be?
- How do the poems reflect the poet?
- Examine how the poets impart a message – or are they simply painting a word picture?
- Some poems are nonsense verse; they are humorous and they play with the crazy English language. Investigate how the humour is created.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

- Have students read through the collection and find the poem they like best, describe why they like this poem. Get students to recite the poem.
- Allow students time to respond to the poems. They might respond by presenting the poem in different ways that include recitation, drama or visual elements.
- View the author's website www.chrischeng.com and view the trailer for *60 Classic Australian Poems*: http://www.chrischeng.com/trailers/60poems.htm