

Collected Poems Francis Webb

Edited and introduced by
Toby Davidson



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Francis and his childhood pet George, both in their mid-twenties, after the poet's return from England in 1950.

INTRODUCTION

It is my labour: the balm, the draughts, the graces
To open the impasse upon their dying faces.
‘The Ghost of the Cock’

If Francis Webb (1925–73) is not Australia’s greatest poet, he is certainly one of Australia’s great poets, featured in virtually every anthology since ‘Idyll’ and ‘Images in Winter’ appeared in Kenneth Slessor’s *Australian Poetry 1945*. Successive generations of Australian poets have acknowledged Webb’s significance or influence, Judith Wright, David Campbell, Rosemary Dobson, Vincent Buckley, A. D. Hope, Gwen Harwood, Les Murray, Bruce Beaver, Robert Adamson, Kevin Hart, Phillip Salom and Dorothy Porter among them. Astonishing, then, that such a poet should have ever been out of print, and, worse still, improperly rendered in the first place.

Angus and Robertson’s 1969 *Collected Poems*, expanded in the 1977 paperback to include ‘Disaster Bay’ and ‘Lament for St Maria Goretti’, offered the widest range prior to this edition, but as Webb’s sister and brother-in-law, Leonie and Peter Meere, have exhaustively detailed in *Francis Webb Poet and Brother* (2001), it contained textual and paragraphing mistakes, plus only a fraction of early and late works. Michael Griffith and James A. McGlade’s selection *Caps and Bells: The Poetry of Francis Webb* (1991) included most of these works and a valuable notes section, but as Patricia Excell points out in her 1993 review of *Cap and Bells*, Webb’s largely unheeded changes to the 1969 edition, held in correspondence at the New South Wales State Library, were not consulted and the old errors remained.

The aim of this edition is to restore the Webb corpus to its correct sequential order, with each poem in its final form. Well-known works including ‘Morgan’s Country’, ‘The Canticle’, ‘Light’, ‘The Brain-washers’, ‘Around Costessey: Scherzo and Adagio of Bruckner’s Ninth’ and ‘Nessun Dorma’ are now as the author intended them in his 1968–69 correspondence with Angus & Robertson editor and former mentor Douglas Stewart (1913–85), who Webb at the time dubbed Australia’s greatest poet (17/11/68, Mitchell Library MSS 3269). Despite good intentions, Stewart ignored

some of Webb's changes and did not have access to the greater share of unpublished works. The two poems 'collected' for the 1977 edition were in fact *selected* from eleven works published in *Poetry Australia* 56: *Francis Webb Commemorative Edition* (1975).

With the advantages of hindsight and scholarship, a definitive Webb corpus can now be established through a series of long-overdue renovations. Three unfinished poems plus a suite of four completed works composed after the greater share of *Leichhardt in Theatre* are included from *Francis Webb Poet and Brother*. Webb's own notes now introduce the longer sequences and his Author's Notes are expanded from the Stewart correspondence. The exception to this is 'Leichhardt in Theatre' (so not to disrupt the theatre motif), but this is countered by information in 'from Leichhardt Pantomime' and an extensive entry in the Author's Notes from Stewart's anthology *Voyager Poems* (1960). 'from Leichhardt Pantomime' (1947) now appears before Webb's debut book *A Drum for Ben Boyd* (1948), not as the opening to 'Leichhardt in Theatre' as in *Cap and Bells*; for although it serves as a clear progenitor of the Leichhardt sequence, much as 'At Twofold Bay' prefigures *A Drum for Ben Boyd*, Webb himself cut it as a prelude and epilogue. A technical exception of sorts has been made for the latter portion of Webb's first epic 'Disaster Bay' (1945–46), later revised for *Leichhardt in Theatre*. Strictly speaking, this should be omitted in favour of the 1952 *Leichhardt* version, but to do so would disrupt the unity of this important early piece, while transplanting the later version would corrupt *Leichhardt in Theatre*. Thus, I have retained the last portion of 'Disaster Bay' in its original form, after which 'from Disaster Bay' serves as a tangible example of Webb's editing and revising. I have chosen not to implement minor, possibly accidental, verbal changes to 'Morgan's Country', 'Bells of St Peter Mancroft' and 'St Therese and the Child' in Webb's *Poets on Record* recording released in 1975, leaving these, with their tiny authorial commentaries, for my Notes on the Poems section. Webb was a fastidious editor of his poetry, and on the handful of occasions I have intervened it has been in consultation with evidence-based scholarship and for reasons given in the Notes on the Poems. Titles and subtitles of poems in quotation marks, such as those in *A Drum for Ben Boyd*, aim to further assist the reader in keeping with the style of previous collected editions, although the first entry for *Ben Boyd*, 'From Our Roving Reporter', belongs to Webb.

Finally, I have left 'aboriginal' with a small 'a' for textual veracity, though Webb's deep respect for Indigenous Australians informs his challenges to colonial delusions in 'Ball's Head Again', 'End of the Picnic' and 'Eyre All Alone' and he would have no doubt endorsed such a change out of both this respect and his late penchant for capitalisation. Episodes of antiquated intolerance, such as that of the whaler in *A Drum for Ben Boyd*, expose a character's objectionable nature rather than any view of the author, and the whaler chapter in the original 1948 edition was accompanied by an especially atavistic Norman Lindsay cartoon. Webb's life-long empathy for the vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed is continually reaffirmed from 'The Hulks at Noumea' to 'Ward Two' and it is indistinguishable from his Catholicism. Time and again he warns of the perils of a disconnected humanity which indulges the catastrophic entitlement of the 'Mask' in 'Birthday', while advocating the humility, compassion and transcendence of 'The Canticle' in all their cosmic immediacy.

Francis Webb was an ambitious, energetic and structurally sound poet from a young age. His earliest surviving poem 'The Hero of the Plain' is dated here as 1940 when its appearance in a local children's page *Sunrise* marked Webb's emergence as a public poet; however, Leonie and Peter Meere estimate its earliest composition date as 1932, at age seven. This goes some way towards explaining Douglas Stewart's reaction to *A Drum for Ben Boyd* sixteen years later:

When I first read it my opinion could be stated in two words. It was major poetry. For Webb to have written it at the age of twenty-two is an extraordinary achievement; without parallel, I imagine, considering its maturity and its merits, in Australian literature. (Stewart, 'An Australian Epic', *Bulletin* 'Red Page', 19 May 1948).

Wherever Webb went his poetry accompanied him, from the Sydney Harbour and New South Wales coast of his youth to air-force training in Canada (1944), then Australia, Canada again, England, Italy, further work and travel throughout Southern Australia (1950–53), Canada, Calcutta and Ireland in brief, then England (notably Birmingham, Norwich, Norfolk, 1953–60), and back to Australia, mostly Sydney and Orange, but also Melbourne where his last, finished, poems were forged. In this sense Webb's

poetry is highly located, literal and realistic. Some of his more esoteric wordplay, occasionally denounced as modernist obscurantism, is more often the result of his absorptive practice, most glaringly in the nautical terms in 'First Watch, Spencer's Gulf', the anatomical Latin of 'Electric: Song of the Brain' or the musical terms in 'Rondo Burleske: Mahler's Ninth'. This is not to suggest that modernist influences, particularly those of Eliot, Yeats, Slessor and Brennan, are not apparent, but rather that Webb's influences do not supersede his locales. Equally, usually simultaneously, this is a poetry of the anti-heroic, religious, mythico-symbolic and allegorical that asks more than a single reading in exchange for its riches. To facilitate this, I have reserved all background information for the Author's Notes and Notes on the Poems sections so new readers can simply turn to 'The Hero of the Plain' and begin, returning or delving where they feel called upon to do so – for these poems respond to and generate many calls, and Webb felt his works were self-explanatory.

Of course the labour – and pleasure – is hardly mine alone. This book owes its life to the generosity and custodianship of the Francis Webb's family, particularly Mrs Claudia Snell and Mrs Leonie Meere, to whom Australian literature is deeply indebted. Patricia Excell has been doubly supportive in her 1986 *Australian Literary Studies* article which first uncovered Webb's unheeded changes, and more recently in her painstaking line-by-line analysis which confirms this edition's definitive status. My grateful thanks to Terriann White, Kate McLeod, Emma Smith, Anne Ryden and Melanie Ostell from UWA Publishing, Daniel Brown, David McCooey, Lyn McCredde, Frances Devlin-Glass, Bernadette Brennan, Peter Steele, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Petra White, Craig Powell, Michael Griffith, Philip Salom, Mal McKimmie, Desmonda Kearney, Sandie Rogitsch, Deakin and Macquarie Universities, Cambria Press (New York), *Westerly*, *Blast*, CBHS Lewisham and The New South Wales State Library for variously assisting my research and commentary. To my wife Amanda for her understanding and patience, thank you. This volume is dedicated to 'Frank' and to those who supported *him*, in the hope that they find solace in this extraordinary life's work together at last in its deserving entirety.

Macquarie University, 2011

EARLY POEMS
1940-47



The Hero of the Plain

The night is coming quickly,
The watchmen leave their piles,
The plain is now deserted,
Alone for many a mile.
A little child was looking,
For his home again,
A rifle shot comes ringing,
O'er the dusty plain.
The child stands rooted to the spot,
He hears it fire again,
He must! but can he do it?
And try to save the plain?
He seized a left match from the ground
And lights its tiny frame,
He drops it on the signal pile,
It bursts into a flame.
A bullet rings in sudden rush,
He never stirred again,
The trees lift mourning branches
O'er the hero of the plain.

A Sunrise

Dawning's faint, seraphic banner,
Soft unfurling in the sky
Flushes faint the vault of heaven,
Calls upon the night to die.
See the purple shadows flying
From the bedside of the dying,
With the wind a requiem sighing,
Ere he bid the stars good-bye.

Misty clouds are swift assembling,
Chords from Eve's forgotten lyre,
Ere the sun in rampant glory,
Plunge them deep in living fire.
And the birds, 'mid splendour soaring,
Pour their matins forth, adoring,
Blessings for a day imploring,
Peace and love—the heart's desire.

Now the fiery king, arising,
From his burnished disc has rolled
Radiant waves of trembling colour,
Dancing flecks of red and gold.
Pure in spotless beauty burning,
One more leaf is softly turning,
One more goal for human yearning,
One more page of life to fold.

Australian Night

The sober shades of eventide,
Creep westward o'er the sky,
And slanting rays of golden dust,
Across the valleys lie.
While, through the stillness overhead,
In black relief 'gainst flaming red,
Like spirits who pursue the dead,
The birds go stringing by.

Agleam, the dusky purple shades
Steal out from forest gloom,
An aureole of heliotrope,
Spun out from hidden loom.
And, free from daytime's heat and glare,
The flowers exotic scents prepare,
To loose them on the freshened air,
And render night a bloom.

At length, upon the velvet skies,
As on a dusky deep,
Another galleon yet is launched,
Her lonely watch to keep.
Soft rays of purest, filtered light,
Dilute the inky depths of night,
—A landscape bathed in silver white—
—A smiling world, asleep.

Retreat

I know a solitude, where pointed trees
 Half-baffle the rife sunlight, chequering
The bush with softly waving lights; and bees
 Keep up a monotone, a murmuring.
Pulsing the pause 'twixt dream and dream, these chimes
 A silvery lapse of water; birds sing there,
 The magpie's carol spells the heavy air,
The lorn coachwhip calls there, oftentimes.

A Lost wind whispers, wraith-like, in the leaves,
 And gently wimples the fern's flowing fronds,
Plays with the halcyon water-drops, and leaves
 A myrrhed musk in the swaying wattle-wands,
Opiate-charged for sleep. No colours bright
 Dazzle the eye; a sarsenet stream of mist
Sobers and tames; and serried heaven-light
 Breaks through in shadowed sheens of amethyst.

This is true Silence, silked and strung with sound,
 And pang-fired with a myriad lutany;
And 'tis the only rest my heart has found,
 Vexed with earth's cymbals, tinkling emptily.
O, for such quietude my eyes are faint
 And my ears, stunned with swelling gyres of noise,
For the peaceful frenzy of one sweet soul-plaint,
 One hazed vision—and one answering Voice.

Palace of Dreams

When death-dewed night is all a-swoon,
Haunted by the driving moon,
Haunted by long sweeps of shade,
Monolith and colonnade
Writhe fantastic arms in air;
Echoing flag and hollow stair
Chequered are by deep, black bars;
Far from grace of winds and stars,
Enmeshed in immortality,
I tread these stairs, and none but I.

Darkly yawns the looming portal,
Solid-hewn, deep-grained, immortal,
Where the stony griffins keep
Station, sunk in lidless sleep;
Earth-plots, where no flower blooms;
Cloisters, lost in mazing glooms;
Warded locks of mystery,
Oblivion the only key.

I have sensed, remote in dreams,
Thick musk, fuming censer-steams,
And heard a distant organ pour
Wild cadence down each corridor;
Traced the crusted wall-outline,
Hieroglyphed with secret sign,
Lingering o'er each storied scroll,
With nameless knowledge in my soul.

Alone, in one night's spacious years,
Beset by crowding hopes and fears,
I have yearned and thought to see,
Through the moon-starts, fitfully,
Another wanderer slowly climb
These worn steps of Loss and Time—

No voice-music, hand-caress,
Spans my silent loneliness:
Enmeshed in immortality,
I tread these stairs—and none but I.

Moonlight

Moonlight comes quietly dreaming into my room;
The spells of midnight are potent, deep,
Dissolving my sleep.
And now fine filigree patterns in trail and sweep
Spin out on the wall, as spun from a secret loom.
Where lately the white-faced clock stammered, mesmerised,
There is light; pale gleamings play on the polished stone
Of the hearth, like sun-glints on water crystallised
By a necromancer; enchanted, alone,
The pinchbeck vase is all a-glimmer, and glowing
In snowy streams through the open window flowing.

What living thing could sleep on such a night?
Winds haunt the trees;
In the spacious skies there are white
Stars spinning; and the late walker sees
Pale ghosts of roses, swimming in ecstasy
Of dews; poinsettias springing
Forth like the painted flames of a dusky pyre;
And hosts of keen leaves flinging,
Like nomad spears, their sharp, green arrow-glints of fire.

Outside, the thickset hedges are rife with sounds
Of industrious little teeth and nibbling beaks;
Sometimes into my taut ear breaks
The distant bark of a dog; through the city-bounds
Are far enough, I can catch a chime of bells,
As the light wind eddies or swells,
Twice...thrice...and all is quiet again,
While the crystal wells of the moon beat down over houses and men.

I could lie for hours, long hours, in this love-light, dreaming
The dreams of night, that are waking dreams,
With these long mote-myriad streams,
And the shine on the vase and the fireplace, glowing and gleaming:
But the restless shuffle of tides on the wet sands

Breaks into the quietude of evening shores,
And the glooms of sleep are as haunted corridors
Where Life, like a wall at the end of Illusion, stands.
The fine-spun patterns of Fancy fade, must fade
Into the shade
Of a restless slumber.
...see how the wan moon spills
One last, lingering levin of Peace, and sinks in the chalice hills.

Night Swimming

Look at that silver water shimmering for you,
Waiting to cradle you in a sudden, cool embrace;
To set your sleeping sinews a-ripple in all their grace;
To revolve your gritted brain on the oiled bands of the shadow—
This is the place.

You, with all your thoughts paralleled into blueprints;
You, with destruction's statistics; you, with your guns;
You pitiful—you brilliant, furious ones—
Off with it, doff it all! Then, on with this motley,
Make this living magic yours, once.

No deep growl in the warm, black throat of night;
The searchlight dreams on a ripple. Lithe bodies, dashing,
Knife the clear moonlight. Like columns crashing,
The whipped sprays crumble to a powdery froth.
Bare arms gleam in the air like swords flashing.

Smoke lifting; the strong fire writhing in its wooden fetters
—All this is not the animation, the breath
Of another existence. It is the current beneath
War, rumours of war. Grip fast this minute; treasure it,
This minute. In a shellburst you will laugh at the idiot, death.

To a Poet

Wayfarer, glorious one,
Heart fiery as a sun, lips stammering prophecies—
That you should pity me is credible, conceivable;
But it is unbelievable that I should pity you.

Yet don't you think, great one, in all your splendid journeys,
Your combats, your tourneys with this gangrened world of ours,
That there are some vignettes you may have overlooked, have lost,
Since you do not melt your mind's frost with any red-hot pennies?

Can those stern eyes, where beauty enters throbbing,
Have missed the conductor bobbing like a monkey on the tram?
Have your alert brain's sentinels been out setting pickets
Against the child chewing tickets, change rolling on the floor;

And factory-girls on the early trains, rough badinage and chaff;
The ceremonial photograph, like a bottle circulating;
And the hordes of relatives, virago-tongued and vicious
(Irony most delicious!) over a ghost's furniture?

Now yours is the grand power, great for good or evil:
The schoolboy (poor devil!) will be told off to study you.
On hills over the sky you have set your plinths of stone;
You have crushed yourself, alone, in unscented, unstarred valleys.

You have fixed, fired a cresset that will always be alive;
I toil, delve, drive at my ballad-blocks of roughness—
That you should pity me is credible, conceivable;
Exquisitely unbelievable that I should pity you!

Cap and Bells

Tonight the stars are yellow sparks
Dashed out from the moon's hot steel;
And for me, now, no menace lurks
In this darkness crannied by lights; nor do I feel
A trace of the old loneliness here in this crowded train;
While, far below me, each naked light trails a sabre
Of blue steel over the grave great peace of the harbour.

To know this peace is to have outgrown
Thoughts of despair, of some driving crank of fate,
Of corroded tissues in the bleak shell of a town:
Darkness, lights, happiness—all are right,
All bear messages of the hidden heart;
And for me always the grave great peace is stronger
In flaring colours, and a laugh, and a careless singer.

Die in the blood and salt of your thoughts; and die
When the columns of your sun are thrust aside and broken;
But I have chosen the little, obscure way
In the dim, shouting vortex; I have taken
A fool's power in his cap and bells
And know that in my time the haggard Prince will discover
A blunt shell of Yorick, that laughs for ever and ever.

Idyll

At noon the sun puffed up, outsize.
We saw a township on the rise;
Jack croaked 'A pub', then filed his throat,
Spat out an encroaching horde of flies.

One-headed Cerberus near the door
Bit off the fag-end of a snore,
Allowed us a red eye's filmy grace
And veiled the awful sight once more.

Sad barman showed a yellow fang;
Sweat was dirt-cheap, the whole place rang
As six-foot told a ten-foot yarn;
One chap was under, and one sang.

I'd bottle up that song without
A licence, just to serve it out,
A ballad, long and cool for days
Of epics, dry canteens, and drought.

We shouldered through the cork-tipped fog,
Paid several zacks and downed the grog;
Then like the brown fox of copperplate
Made exit over the lazy dog.

A Tip for Saturday

I met Jack on a Friday night,
Headway was medium, in spite
Of lurching walls in the spinning town,
Taxis that sought to mow him down,
Strange girls that dashed into his arms,
Then cursed him in no uncertain terms.
The air was still, the sky was grey.
I thought of tips for Saturday.

The navigator's task affords
Small safety from a spate of words.
He pointed me to starry skies
On stilts of queer philosophies,
While oaths made rapid cubic gain,
Like roly-poly on the plain.

I quote one mighty thought on wars:
There'd be some friction if the stars
Were like us, macrocosms jammed
Edgeways like sardines on this damned
Insignificant little planet:
Figuratively, literally, he spat on it.

Meekly surrendering to the shocks
Of war, religion, politics,
My voice could not attempt a breach.
Jack filled the road with noisy speech,
With gusto, verve, and animation
From Windsor pub to Town Hall station.

The air was still, the sky was grey.
Reluctantly I turned away
Without a tip for Saturday.

Compliments of the Audience

(To certain contemporary poets)

Before the show starts, a calling of nerves to order.
For the few fortunate reviewers a walk-over; for many
Of us two-and-sixpenny seats, a good view, but harder
Than the gold and morocco for opulent half a guinea.

Lights out—we are ready, so many gaping wounds
For the crude application of salt, or a malted morphine.
The conductor fools with his baton; appropriate sounds
Like zigzag titles flicker over our screen.

Point one—well taken! we furnish no riposte,
Admit we are animals gutted out with the flame
Of lust and savagery—maggots happily lost
In our gangrened cities. We wriggle with the maggot's shame.

No God, you say? Good!—pass us our largest axe,
Plummet the steeples, storm the confessional!
To be moulded in hands of ignorance like so much wax
When the future's locked up, the present open to all!

How's this: we are giant things trapped in an endless mural,
Sad rebels oiled into timeless agony,
Fixed by the artist Fate to gestures of peril?
We dress up in silent suffering and dignity.

All over—pray, pardon the yawn we cannot hide;
Be indulgent with us, the lost ones, as back we go
To the old faiths, philosophies, oysters and beer outside,
Yet never forgetting your most impressive show.

Images in Winter

(From a longer poem)

They were no 'hollow men' who saw with me
The sleepy, rolling andante of still water,
Spun tissues of green and purple; and after
Sluggish spirals of darkness dusted the sky,
The squat bluffs sliding chainwise into pits
Troubled by floating colour. Each slow morning
Was the slim beauty around a corner of sleep.
Vaulting the moss-pocked wharves, a fog laid nets
Scarving the gullets of slouching, cynical streets.
A stray word fell like a stoned bird from the lips.
The street lamps quivered in a jellied iris of gold;
And someone wading through the tumbling whiteness
Wore mystery with the air of an ancient ship;
A thousand petty sirens skirled and filled
The muffled air with a symphony's completeness.
Out in the bay, fantastic hulls lay rotting
(Long since burnt out, pared down for their iron thoughts),
At grips with the pulling mud, and still awaiting
The legend of yellow maps, the challenge of ports.

And so I make the secret yours, my friend
Of long-winded endurance! This is why
(In an era of free-verse, poor company)
I pin my faith on slipping images
Twisting like smoke or a fish caught in the hand.
These are some company for the crumbling galleries,
The brain of this, our black synthetic dusk.
I keep a record of the whip of seas;
My candle clasps blue fingers on the desk;
That tattered swagman, Death on a Friday night
May pop in with the appropriate metaphor,
And then our talk is of momentous things:
A broken harp smouldering from the brush of wings;
A ship's brown wooden wheel that brings the spar,
The gull in a green storm clear as the maker's name;
Such huge conceits as these, while the dodging flame

Of the candle writes cunning shadows on the air.
The desert edges out its blunt grey sands;
Our household gods are the clock, the broken mirror,
And through the seven lean visions of this terror
I keep my faith with you, my vanished friends.

Middle Harbour

The hour's a graven depth; all images gather
To a giant balance, a level climax and height.
You speak of colour—here's where all colour sleeps
Misted by the breathing of wedded dimness and light.
Each poised oar trails its phosphorescent feather,
The curving brilliance leaps
And shivers back to the dark lungs of the water.

The scales are even and tremble; the glass trembles;
The image ripens, shudders away and tumbles
Down long furrows of perspective to the eye.
Perfect impact of peace, and one fool apart.
O fingers of thought, not captive to the heart,
Why jangle these chords of loveliness for a theme,
With a bird, a quiet fisher, a twitching gleam,
So many swaying lyrics to cry
You have been well paid: take up your purse and go?

Surely in hopelessness I will cast down
The Jacob's coat of a few jaded colours, be plan
Of the etching, not a shadow of discord thrown
By the wiry hands of a mumbling moralist;
Be one with the cormorant, or the fisherman,
Nothing for the head but a haul, a line for the wrist,
Everything positive and past concern—
Speechless with flight, to leave all thought crumpled there,
Motley cast down beside the marble stair.

An Old Record

The books have devised a setting fit for us.
Some documented stage-convention claims
Its candle—a tangle of shadows laid thus and thus,
Stapled with tricks of colour as in our vague dreams;
The metronome like that inquiring clock
Niched in a heart's grey tower, as I might say
Allotting its due of panic to each day,
Huge traffic of life and death, the lapse and shock
Of derelict thought, event.

And on fresh tack

I thread spent hulls, reefs of the future, and danger,
Pirate of peace, to a port of drift and slack,
I ring you with mountain-minutes, dead, silver singer.

For properties—I am the shadow and glimmer;
My clean-poised thought like an otter will strike after
Some warped glint in the depths, a silver tremor,
Still careless if all it finds be a stone in the water.
In this powdering light on the shaken yellow beach
I finger a salvage-shred, bleached waxen shell
Still shivering with fugitive passion of a bell,
Epic of drama and storm passed out of reach—
Yet death, hungry for fragments, switches back a long
Tentacle from that storm: the bell swept out so far
Is quarry for the throttling wind; so your fading song
Swings out in cadence like a falling star.

This jaded earth props and staggers—give me meaning
For spur, or a call from the garbled scrub of the night;
Beauty, I tell you, seems almost past sustaining;
Baffled by maniac hands that bluff the light
So few, like Roland at the crumbling wall
Circling God knows what perils, will wind out
A rusted note of challenge, and jauntily wait
For an echo—so much as a simple flint to fall.

And now that leit-motif, that last note curls
Out to the thronged ditches and valour fills the sky.

Hear how that whippet oboe snarls—
A yellow streak of defiance—at the crowding hills!



Bridgehead

A chain of footprints over the sand that night,
Emphatic and in one direction headed from the sea;
None marked the stealthy bridgehead—there was no light
For the confusion of such an enemy;
No steady candle-power, but we all remember
How lightning laid weals on the rigid arch of the sky.

Not being fools that the crooked hands of the rain
Might beckon to witness a final grating and flare,
Giant vision of the earth surrendered again
Down splintered glass perspectives of each crashed year;
We caressed our failing fires, played halting chess
With ghostly pawns on the darkened plots of despair.

Stirred up the planets into a whirling flux,
Wound out the spattering gullies of the thunder!
We crouched in our beauty, waiting for the stacks
To topple, pinning our sullen bodies under
The frozen flanks of death on a broken world,
Sprawling over the flattened smudge of the cinder.

Yet did we not hear some alien arc of sound
Swinging against the battering leagues of sea?
That quaking light played zigzag tricks around
Our starting bridges of sight and sanity;
Often the twitching eyes of the nearly-dead
Grove back for the smile of the sun in a twisted tree.

Out there again—surely the lifted muzzle
Of laughter wedging into the snarling skies,
Besieging our shuttered windows with the dazzle
Of anti-climax playing on reddened eyes?
Over the wheeling mist of settling cities
Flashed the ironic laughter of sunrise.



The Mountains

Stumbling through channels of silence, we send out
That wild note of our onset to twist along
Paths of the wounded light, and veer about
The mountains with blunted mumblings of a gong.

And lean, grey, avid angels of the mist
Flap past us for a moment in sullen flight;
Sink back to another æon of unrest,
Chained by the iron chasms about their feet.

This is where Time died centuries ago,
His huge, white, rigid body broken over
The giant wheel of the sky to a flux of snow,
And mist still wandering near him, like a lover.

Vancouver by Rail

A scrap of hill on a grey sky;
Huge claws of distance powdering up
A mass of naked, dead-white plains;
And bare posts keeping decent step—

Here's gold for memory's rusted bins,
Rich purple for her floating floors,
Queer treasure to sift up behind
A brain's uneasily-guarded doors.

Someone claims silver rivers soon:
All beauty's down the line, I know—
Blunt trees and mountains staggering
Under a dazzling drag of snow;

And there the silly fish of thought
Will not find twitching-space for a fin.
As for this cold, thin element,
They gulp it quickly, deeply, in.

The Hulks at Noumea

Traveller, pocketed in running whorls,
Fooling at hide-and-seek with dogged Time,
You may find peace here when the sky unfurls
And war's a spread tornado, leaving calm;
Find satiation for those whittling hungers
Plunging you into the dust for curios
When your heart's Helen, with failing guns, surrenders
To a tattered photograph as the light goes.

Perhaps, when desires and bitterness have subsided,
Stumbling down future gangways, you'll give thanks
For the grand Comedy that has provided
Legions of snapped-off masks and bleaching planks
Wanting your Midas-thought, your heart's full play,
More spiritual than wind that claws and pulls
Like a wharf-labourer striving to drag away
The little pillage of seas, these unnamed hulls.

The sun's for youth and harshness, a flung stone
Echoing around the four iron walls of the brain,
Sharp to expose and batter the fractured bone.
The dry, yellow throat of dawn is eager to drain
Draughts of legend and kindness that night spills.
But now night's mystery links me as I stand
To the preposterous little hunchbacked hills,
With darkness clamping over us, like a hand.

That listing schooner seems almost to move
Through the pinched memories of its sea-going,
Like a dead princess in a glass alcove,
Still lovely when the lamp's fluttering;
Now, as the drifting moon quietly dips down
A silver killick turning in still air,
I hear the chant of the sounder, a curved knife thrown
Through papery distances over water and shore.

And this is the hope of ships that arc the spray,
Take fine lines of tension through storm—are left to rot,
Ticked off and herded into some blind bay;
Darkness may fall and bring an errant thought.
This is our hope who leave dry hulls behind:
When life that is shrouding, purpose, navigator,
Quits fused-out bones for the screaming gull of the wind,
There'll be moonlight, perhaps a traveller.

Poem for Easter

In our time's Passion the world rattled with stress
 Wind-staggered planks pronging the buckled hide—
Like a spent craft whose sweep hangs listless and empty
 Twitching in each aimless current, without a guide.

And it was easy enough then to drift about like the sweep
 Under a bare pole for totem and a languid star
Sagging with its own battles; our kind of peace
 Dozed over Time and Death and eternal war.

This was the season of Death, his ultimate lantern
 Splitting our cone of darkness, his gaping colour
Marking our path beneath rising weather and water.
 Well, we would drown quietly—no hand clutched the tiller.

The blaze lit Death, Death only—we can swear this—
 That racked Figure above us like a transfixed gull
Hung dead with a slack, dead mouth, yet whence he came the Voice
 Downwind, a lonely thunderclap, crying: 'Be still'?

Whose hand pinched out the lightning, crushed the storm,
 We wondered, drifting on in our dull fashion
Soon forgetting the question; but a few hours later
 Dawn came to some of us in the manner of a vision.

Disaster Bay

Seventy-six lives foundered on this corner of the coast,
The lucky ones pulped on the rocks, the others pushing
At the soft clinging evil of water with flapping hands;
Their screams needled the drumming bass of the breakers,
Wild counterpoint of distress under a calm sky,
As the *Ly-ee Moon*, little forsaken nation
With a fool at the helm, went down. You look for tempests,
Guns, red abrasions notched on the sky,
Some camouflage drawn tightly as a skin,
The pinchbeck halo of a kind untruth,
When fire rubbles a city or a ship gives in,
Moulded to the trough of a wave, drifts limp and relaxed
As a fan spread out or a broken basket on the water.

But this, as our own disasters, comes unnamed.
Ungarnished by thunder, current or chivalry
To lift heroic capitals in a text.
There's nothing to tower or dwarf the seventy-six,
Life-sized, huddled in their gulf—yet so close to us,
That imagination, that memory, like a huge bubble,
Brings a giant slow rupture and cleavage, and their gulf
Shakes open. Our eyes, timeless as stars,
Peer down again at their restless agonies.

But we must curtain that fracture in the brain
Gaping resistless enough in its own good time
(Death firing the curtain, guarding exit-doors),
Turn up the lamp, focus a perilous setting
Strictly to our purpose, a gaunt and fatal coast;
Cast flares over a livid stucco sea
And a small freighter down there trapped like an ant
Labouring to scale these hostile gradients,
Squalls like dust always beating her back.
This is the mourner's ship. (Already a crop of gravestones
Runs like low battlements parapeting the cliff
Where the *Ly-ee Moon* perished). She carries pines from Norfolk,

A tree for each life, young graft on withering memories:
For marble weathers and darkens, leans slowly back
To the level, the substance of earth. Master the cliff,
Plant warnings in order on the shore and there is defiance,
Growth, a good omen where nothing flourished before.

But something less a memory than a menace,
A vicious suction trawls about the rocks
That have tasted blood. The day is edged in black.
The men on the freighter feel it: cunning leverage,
Pitted, carious fangs of the shore bared, grinning,
Following fogs like harrying formless Furies,
Glutted, bloated with vengeance, still avid for a victim.
Watch them dodge nightmare up to Womboyn River
And there peer out at their goal. Rain-swept and desolate,
That last thin channel mocks them, crying: Come,
You with libations, meet the dead you celebrate.
And they lose heart; a nervous tongue to the lip,
A final grope for the weather's pulse. The consignment
Takes root back at the river's edge. Madness to hazard
That narrow fosse of turmoil girdling the Cape,
A grey branch spurting ghastly flowers of spray.

Green Cape, Flinders called it, fooled by a day of sunshine
Which thatched the cliffs with the distant shimmer of grass.
Tacking well offshore he could not sense
Violence coiled in the air, far less imagine
A sea-whelp harboured in the groin of rock and those long
Spiked limbs of outcropping reef that stretch well out,
Spit ships on agony like birds, pluck plumage from ribs.

Knowing this Southern coast, you hardly dare
Guess at the curious origins of the dust that creeps
Away from your feet through tindery tussocks of grass;
And the old tracks still lead you onward guilelessly
To spent hearths, perhaps a mound, or a fissured circle



Of red brick powdering, the crouching bones of the sheep;
Their whiteness rasps at your mind. Always the sea
Which has taken over the soul of all these things
Sings restlessly in the limits of all of your thoughts:
A dies irae of demons, uncanny softness,
Thousands of voices mumbling, travesties of faces
Where spindrift on the water is drawn out
And racked to shapelessness over a slow green wheel;
The voices erupt, suddenly in a wide pounding chord,
Semblance of music, requiem that bruises your shoulders
With a sodden leaden cope of the sea's dead.

Then, the coastline. No gracious harvest for the eyes,
Irregular truss of splintered promontories,
Split peaks jostling the rounded flanks of bays.
Such dripping, monstrous headlands, you might think,
Are more than stone. Kelp tufts them like a mane,
Furrows mine them like deep and breathing gulleets;
Beast rather than stone, of sea rather than land.

The names of places toll their savage records
Of drama, red lines of loss, and punching bells
Horror breaching the peace of houses, leaving them awash,
Waterlogged with memories, derelict a year or two:
Gabo and Green Cape and Disaster Bay—
Disaster Bay, mouthing pariah of a bay,
Lurks close behind the strong trunk of the Cape
For fragments clawed and mangled and cast away.
These places hate life insanely, under their lash
Wind-bitten trees grow watchful, hunt in packs,
Wiry and sinewy under dark bunched hides.

Perpetual warfare, sea enfilading land,
Volleying thick puffs of sound. There's treacherous truce
When ships approach, sleep-walkers pale and reckless;
Forces deploy, converge on the living thing.



So they trap ships, chain and blindfold them with fog,
Pivot them on swirling hubs of squall;
But the *Ly-ee Moon*? What agency was there,
On a clear night of winter, almost windless,
With every passenger in a shadow of sleep,
Penumbra to the vast shadow of terror?

If you like, we can pause here for a while:
They've got McNally by the throat with their questions
(He straddled safely on the bucking rope)—
They hold McNally under glass, the journalists,
A man still uneasy with life like a new trinket,
Sweat gleaming on his temples. What does he say?
'I don't know. I was asleep when it happened.
Someone tried to kill me—no, I didn't know him—
Tried to dislodge me from the last scrap of the taffrail—
Tearing at my face, screaming, like a woman—a wave caught him—
I was there half an hour. The bell was loose amidships;
Every time a wave hit us you could hear it:
That sullen clang...clang...I thought it would drive me crazy.'

...Now shade that light to a flicker,
Set it by a winter moon. We go back now,
Crave but a stealthy light, resurrectionists stealing
Through the will-of-the-wisp and frail blue glims of fungus,
And dried shrubs rattling in the graveyard of the years.
Pick out our year, docketed with a lost ship's name,
Muffle the mattocks and picks of examination,
Till the light gasps out and the shriek of the mandrake warns us.

We take the track of that voyage. It's a long journey
At a ballad-gait, broken in places, but quiet,
With little of speech—and the passengers sleep, you remember—
Submerged, almost in darkness.
Aloof patrols,
Your thoughts, a convoy of gulls for tragedy,



Feather-noiseless. Your own analogies
To keep you warm lash concentration down
When gusts gibber in the rigging. At the end
Keep fast your grapple on life, do not circle over
These ghosts in their second drowning.

A winter's night. Good visibility,
Cold, clear. Wind freshening from the south-east,
A dangerous breeze for this section of the coast,
Well-noted by the skipper. Slight to moderate seas.

Heading towards Gabo, where a winking light
Curvets to the ship's motion. With each slight
Roll off-axis over racing foam
Comes the slap-slap-slap of a pitchless metronome.

A few lolling clouds, casual frosty stars.
Mutilating some wisp of a song between his teeth
The officer on watch gazes absently out beneath
Lamplight that peppers his face with changing scars.

By now, most passengers sleep on the *Ly-ee Moon*,
Husked safely from the cold in a deep cocoon;
But a piano still jigs in the saloon, there are random noises,
The chink of glasses, the up and down of voices.

Gabo to port. A shapeless islands swells,
Keeps company for a while. Two giant beacons burn
—Sharp spokes pierce rippling auras—then drop astern.

The graph is altered. There is a rattle of bells,

And in a charge of bubbles we go about,
Veering in towards drama and Cape Howe;
Eyried in mist we feel the brush of doubt
As stars congeal, the air thickens. There are warnings now.



Gabo astern. A stretch
Of darkness slit with grey
Where, past dim trouble of spray,
Flickers the quiet beach.

But something haunts this bend,
Flat, lifeless and lonely,
With a sound not of the wind
Nor of surf only.

Held in the frozen grip
Of past terror, lost
Ship calls to passing ship,
Ghost to coming ghost.

Rub at the wind-gridded glass for a moment and stare
Over this blind fool's shoulder towards the shore
Where squadrons of shadow load the heavy air:
The *Monumental City* broke up here,
Slewed on a reef in a welter of flying froth;
Thirty men drifting entangled in her litter of gear—

You feel those pinions banked about our path?
This shell of rumours jolting, butting like a moth
Through a heaving web, a tunnel tense with fear?

Cape Howe hangs close.

A grim squared knuckle of rock
Gnarled by sparring storms buckles each shock
Of lurching leagues, moon-swollen to bursting-point,
Vast rippling thews, a tensile elbow-joint
Feel for the windpipe of earth's last growling verge;
And here's deep water, an ocean's tough barrage,
A vertical staggering lift, vertiginous fall,
Lungeing, bucketing, unrhythmical,
While in the wallowing action of the swell

The bared screw grinds and thuds like a moving boulder.

There's an icier glaze on the stars, the wind's colder;
Drawing a lustreless tether we strain north-east
Beyond the cloudy corner of the coast.

Far back along the shore
Lies the landfall of broken ships.
Away from the buffet and roar
They have drifted home,
Away from the waxen chips
Of scud and foam.

Here are the fastnesses
Of the sea's abandoned things.
A noiseless almoner,
The numb tide brings
Dead seagulls, spoil of ships,
Torn seaweeds to caress
Stone's cold blue feet,
The silent mariner.
Feather-footed and dumb,
The wave leaves in retreat
Glimmers and shimmerings
Along the shingle-strips,
A glass proscenium.

And here old marionettes
Faded and awry
Limp furlongs hopelessly:
The jaded thin corvettes
And sunken schooners glide
Unmanned, ropes creak like chains
Salt-caked to rigidity;
Seams gape wide;
The moon's loop, lost and dull,

Zones listing decks
Lichened with weather-stains.
Shallow coils and flecks
Of glowing phosphorus
Ember the hollow hull.

Sometimes a channel of sound,
A flutter of indrawn breath,
Where water trickling beneath
The steep chine of the cliffs
Chatters, a meaningless
Echo of voices drowned.
Lean outposts of rock
Flank the dwindled spaces.
What shadowy audience?
Sometimes a moonray traces
On the dark palettes of rifts
Fitful hieroglyphs
Or lines of crumbling faces;
Sometimes stones unlock
As a pebble shifts;
Immobile, intense,
The audience is Death.

The coast wades past. Now you can feel
Storm broaching calm, the clock run back;
You see through distance, shrouds of black,
The white bone arm of fear wind out
On a squeaking ratchet-wheel.

As, hard alee, the air's fringe shakes,
The ghost of a rocket trails along
A thin red wire, a whining song,
Over the shrinking hulk wedged fast
On a reef where lightning quakes.

Like the snap of a pistol or whip
One damp patched sail in the acute
Drive of the wind flaps a grey salute—
What freed this craft from the muzzling sand?
Ship cries to passing ship.

Storm drove the *Jane Spiers* in so far, a dense
Tumult pinned her, tacking warily, down;
She rammed the beach at unnatural speed; at once
Foremast and mainmast cracked like brittle bone.

But the mizzen still held, death swung the loose boom about;
When she struck, when that wind-slung missile of wood
Fetched up so quickly, air seemed to give out;
Men sprawled on the decks, scrambled up spitting blood.

Panic below, of course—lights went by the board,
Some of them plummeting down in a guttering arc,
And lights are important when life's an overtaxed cord:
There were curses and fists and uproar down in the dark.

And then nothing but dark, garrotting sound,
Only the dazed, hushed memories struggle forth,
And out of the planes of memory, bleak polar ground,
Men, lights and ships and action go further North.

The barque, *Jane Spiers*,
Little clutter of forgotten timbers
Under the ti-tree, buried in sand;
Keel and ribs and spars
Drowning in the yellow church
Of Stephen's Beach.

Only a twisted shank,
Oddity of time like a fossil,
Curls up out of the sand;

Only the sea-birds think
And the hopping land-birds watch
On Stephen's Beach.

But minutes tick past: Cape Howe slips far behind;
What cause for fear? No one may trust the night
That plucks response from things lodged deep in the mind,
Omens, unreason. While the wake skims level and white,

Churned away from the blade of the steady bows,
And steady's the course, untroubled the drowsy guide,
You know that this wraith of a ship must safely browse
Home in the roadstead, nudged by leisurely tide.

And now, as a cloud topples from the moon like a leech,
The seaway eases and flakes into brilliant caves,
A gully of pearl loops out on the distant beach,
And oars of silver lick at the turning waves.

Midnight stuns the air. The piano stops playing,
The shuttle of voices drops, screws muffled in the hull;
The flimsy envelope of water tears with a fraying
Rustle, like a whisper, the wind flags in a lull.

This watch is up: the officer makes his brief
Entry in the log, checks the charts, no longer alone;
Ready, yawning a little, stands the relief;
Something makes both of them speak in an undertone:

'Reporting for duty, Sir, everything right up here?'
'Everything right here but a bit shaky myself, Joe,
Been seeing things and hearing noises...queer,
Must be getting too old—any trouble below?

'Nothing? Well, good-night and keep your eyes skinned,
The glass looks fair enough, but I don't trust that wind.'

Echoes and whispers bubble around the keel;
A shadow goes out, a shadow takes the wheel.

Yet there's no danger from wind when moonlight carves
The course to follow, a blazing, narrowing scar;
When the fine thread of the fore-stay cleanly halves
The Green Cape light, pinpointed, like a low star,
A star of assurance. Nadgee threshes by;
Here the seaboard withdraws like a giant bay,
And craning hills sheer off to become the sky;
Each furlong pulls the shore further away.

Bells pattern the air—growing less real,
The *Ly-ee Moon*, and your thoughts wavering, too,
Blinded by that vanishing hour, weary of the steel
Flick-over of the wake, buzz and grind of the screw.

But light is back in the wheelhouse, where lamps connive
At a thousand conspiracies of shadow and glare;
Hunched over his wheel, the steersman looks alive,
Though silence lies on him like dust, lies everywhere.

Look into his eyes: some of his thoughts are your own,
Shuffling like cogs in a chain-gang, clockwork round.
Of what is he thinking, this seaman, for ever blown
In a dim pocket of light to the port of the drowned?

Minutes leap. On the hour's towering ascent
A blue, dead sailor jerks out of the sea,
Netted in phosphorescence, head slumped and bent,
Stone mouth leaking peril and prophecy.

His fingers on the bollard glitter, pale and stark
Like the limp rays of a starfish, leave traces of frost
As he sinks back, and the arm jerks out in an arc:
Ghost salutes coming ghost.

Minutes press. Another hour gathers with the roar
Of surf looming up with the returning line of shore,
And here the *City of Sydney* went aground
In a crazy riot of sirens, as fog closed round.

But the light flashes clearly, whirls on the hump of the Cape
A spattering disk of warning, a sign known well.
Breakers hurl guttural warnings about the shape
Of table-topped rocks, close at hand and visible—

Full speed, eyes sharp with terror, hands that pluck
Vainly at the wheel—too late the sudden spin:
The cry of a ghost, fading out—Christ, we've struck!
As the lights snap out and darkness thunders in.