

Marie E J Pitt (1869 – 1948) – ‘Clarke Street Lefty’

Lyrical & Romantic Poet, Socialist, Feminist, Pacifist, Christian.

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[img – Marie Pitt, 1924]

Marie Elizabeth Josephine McKeown was born in rural Victoria at Bullumwaal in 1869 – a gold mining settlement north of Bairnsdale. The daughter of a gold miner known as ‘Wild Ned’, he hailed from County Armagh in Ireland. Her mother, Mary, came from County Ayr in Scotland. The eldest of seven children.

The McKeown family lived in slab house with a bark roof – her mother used to remark that the cows were better housed. Mary was an amateur poet and the father Wild Ned wrote hymns. Marie would later be strongly influenced by the legends of both Ireland and Scotland. Around 1872 (when Marie was three) the family moved to Doherty’s Corner at Wy Yung on the Mitchell River in east Gippsland. Marie missed a lot of school as she had worked out that she could earn more money for the family than the occasional fines imposed for no-attendance. Probably because of this she failed in the attempt to become a teacher like her mother. She had become ill with neuralgia and incipient anaemia. Despite this the young woman went seeking work and eventually working in photography.

In Bairnsdale she met William Henry Pitt, a gold miner whom she married in 1893. They went to Tasmania where they live in various mining camps as he followed where mining work was. It was her time in these mining camps, in rural Tasmania, that Marie’s interests in women’s and worker’s rights became important. Before she had become interested in the bushland around where she lived in Doherty’s Corner. She was Vice President in Mathima of the Worker’s Political league. The young couple had three children of which two survived. (Evaline Marie and Bill). It was this period coupled with her country upbringing in Gippsland that shaped her both politically and more importantly poetically. Giving her that strong connection and resonance with the Australian bush and for the underdog and over-trodden worker.

Pitt has been described by Wannan in his introduction to the ‘1944 Selected Poems of E J Pitt’ thus,

“... (she is) a true Romantic. She interprets our country as she sees it ... Her pictures are not photographic, but are fused with emotion. She arouses in us the feeling which swept over her in the presence of some particular aspect of nature.”

One of the clearest example of her connection both to the bush and to the past is in the poem 'Doherty's Corner'. This is part of it:

*There's no bush to-day at Doherty's Corner,
Only strange green hills and the glint of a far bay;
Time has come like a thief and stolen the wonder
And magic of Yesterday.*

*There are no fairies now at Doherty's Corner,
Where dusky spider-orchids and wild white daises grew;
Time that tilled the heart of the singing forest
Has stone her fairies too.*

(last stanzas)

*There's no bush to-day at Doherty's corner,
No pipers will come with pipes skirling again
To dance for me on Henderson's hill in the moonlight,
Or cry in the fairy rain.*

*It's a kind green land at Doherty's Corner,
And new, fair children frolic its hills upon;
But once Once in the years that are half forgotten
Once it was Avalon.*

By 1905 the Pitts had returned to Victoria as William had contracted a lung disease and would die within seven years. As she was now the carer for her sick husband, Marie supported her family with income from writing, clerical work and reading for publishers.

Her literary talents are finally recognised and Marie receives an ongoing Commonwealth Literary fund from 1910 – to her death. Politically she becomes involved with the Victorian Socialist Party amongst other causes, and editor of their journal - 'The Socialist' - albeit for a year in 1911.

O'Dowd stated that in her writings for The Socialist, over the years, managed 'to criticise the press, the Church and the State'.

In 1911 her first book of poetry is released 'The Horses of the Hills'. Its publication costs paid for by a committee of her friends including the poet Bernard O'Dowd. Further books of poetry eventually followed. 'Bairnsdale' (1922), 'The Poems of Marie E J Pitt' (1925) and 'Selected Poems' (1944). Though in the latter her more left wing rural poems are excised.

From 1920s on she becomes a regular contributor to 'The School Paper'. This was distributed weekly to all primary school students in Victoria by the Education Department. To stimulate children's reading. Almost 30% of the material was written by Australian authors. This was unusual as Australia still thought of itself in Mother England's orbit. The



School Paper were compulsory reading well into the late 1960s (by then renamed – Meteor, Comet, Orbit).

[img - 155 Clarke St]

By 1924 Marie Pitt had moved to Northcote when she was around 51 years. Another poet and also keen ‘leftie’ Bernie O’Dowd (1866 – 1953) joined her. Controversially leaving his own family at age 54 to move in with Pitt.

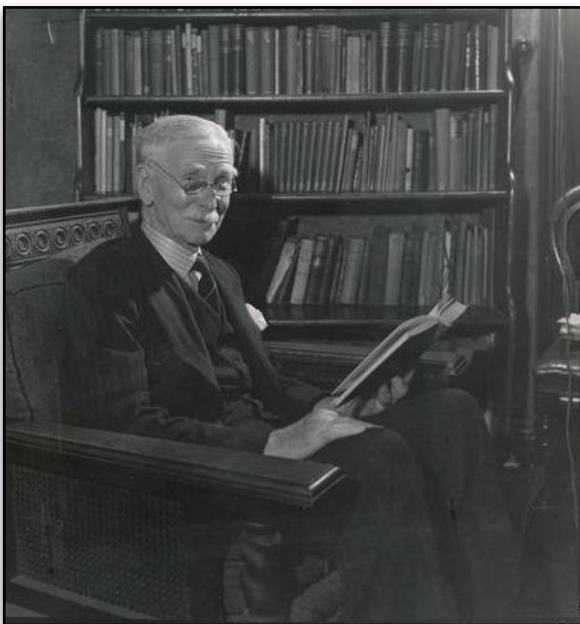
They resided at 155 Clarke St., Northcote – she named the house Marienfels. It was a two storey Italianate Victorian brick

structure. Bernie O’Dowd was a poet, librarian at the State Library and later parliamentary draftsman. It is unlikely he suffered the poverty the Pitts did in Tasmania. They were both strong supporters of the Unitarian Church from the 1920s. Pitt and O’Dowd had strong and forceful personalities. On some things there must have been serious opposition. Marie was an active pacifist and thus opposed to WWI. O’Dowd was not. They were both passionate socialists and cared deeply about workers rights.

Ironically, it is O’Dowd’s words (with Felix Meyer, re-wording Hudson’s inscription) on the western wall of the Shrine of Remembrance, on St Kilda Rd, (though uncredited). This was project that O’Dowd cared about. Interestingly the shrine in its original design had no Christian symbols. At the time this was a cause for much dissent from the church fathers in

Melbourne. It was General Sir John Monash who managed the project and felt deeply about the non-use of a cross. He died in 1931, unfortunately before this pet project was completed in 1934 These are the words from the west wall which O’Dowd contributed:

“Let all men know that this is holy ground. This shrine, established in the hearts of men as on the solid earth, commemorate a people’s fortitude and sacrifice. Ye therefore that come after, give remembrance. “



[img – O’Dowd in study]

Pitt and O’Dowd were a happy couple in Clarke St, Northcote. They became quite

well known in Melbourne’s intellectual circles. Sometimes their life was complicated by the fact that O’Dowd was still married to another woman. Thus the couple became quite a

notorious item in the rather moralistic atmosphere of Melbourne. Despite this complication they remained committed to each other into old age and death. In their own unique way, they struck a considerable blow against conservatism.

Bernd O’Dowd’s wife was catholic and refused to grant a divorce. Marie served an ultimatum on her partner –‘make a decision which woman you want to be with’. He stayed with Marie.

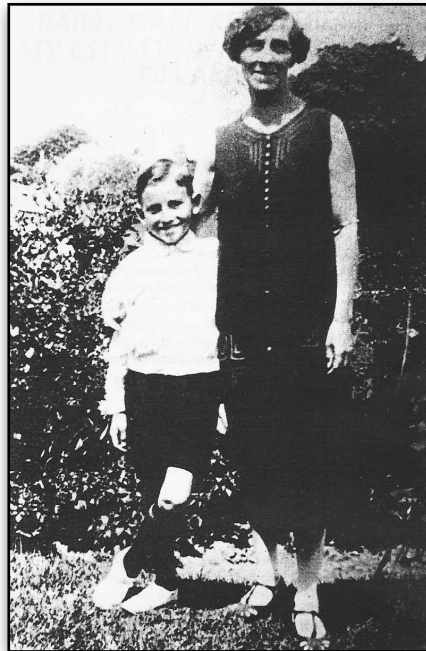
Marie Pitt’s Tasmanian poetry focuses on three elements: Worker’s rights, Romance of the Bush and Feminism.

In particular ‘**The Keening**’ was written as a cry of anguish by the wife and mother of his children for her sick and dying mining husband. H was in his 30s and unable to claim compensation for the fatal lung disease contracted from his work in the Tasmanian mines.

*We are the women and children,
Of the men that mined for gold,
Heavy are we with sorrow,
Heavy as heart can hold,
Galled are we with injustice,
Sick to the soul of loss,
Husbands and sons and brothers
Slain for the yellow dross!*

(the last stanza)

*We are the women and children
Of the men that ye mowed like wheat;
Some of us slave for a pittance –
Some of us walk the street;
Bodies and souls, ye have scourged us;
Ye have winnowed us flesh from bone:
But, by the God you have flouted,
We will come again for our own.*



[img Marie with grandson]

This is a picture of Marie with her grandson (William, son of Bill Pitt) in 1929.

Colleen Burke in her introduction to **Doherty’s Corner** – the rather slender mini biography released in 1985, describes her,

“Always outspoken, Marie Pitt’s personal and political beliefs were often a fiery blend of socialism, feminism and the best aspects of Christianity.”

An example of Pitt’s out-spokenness and Christian philosophy is that on abortion of which she was against. Probably not surprising considering her life story. She stated her ideas thus:

“... (I believe that) the woman who resorts to this forlorn hope of saving her name (abortion), and so retaining her commercial currency, and the nurse who undertakes to help her through, are fools of the first order, but then desperate people are mostly foolhardy, and the capitalist system is the breeder of desperate people, desperate for gain, desperate for social standing, desperate for things that, in the truest sense, are worth little or nothing.”

In 1916 the Melbourne Literary Club was formed. Main protagonists included many known left wing believers including Henry Tate, Nettie & Vance Palmer and Elsie Cole. Marie was chair of the committee and one of her poems appeared in the first magazine. It was now period of World War One and Pitt was defiantly anti-war. During the ensuing years censorship and repressive legislation were enacted and it was a crime to carry a red flag – one her friends and literary editor was duly arrested.

The years that followed allowed her to live with literary and left-wing regular visitors to Marienfels in Clarke St, Northcote. She was a regular contributor of poems to ‘The Bulletin’ and ‘The School Paper’. Even authors like Arthur Upfield who didn’t like poetry wrote rather glowing of her work’s quality. She continued her reading work for the publishers Ward Lock and many Australian writers were ably assisted by her. She dedicated poems on the passing of both Archibald, editor of the Bulletin, and Adam Lindsay Gordon who had suicided at the youthful age of 37 years.

Marie’s mother died in 1930 aged 89 and during this period her own health deteriorated. She had never been that healthy. She suffered from high blood pressure. Despite these ‘inconveniences’ Pitt kept her interest in Australian writers active. She obtained a grant from the Commonwealth Literary Fund for Roy Bridges to write about the Tasmanian convict system. During this period her literary pension was increased to 1 pound a week. Around 1936 She made contact via her son Bill Pitt, with Harry Hooton a poet, anarchist and political activist. She was to have a long literary relationship with him. He was to become a pacifist in WWII and in 1940 security police raided his home, confiscating books

and the many letters from Marie. The latter which are now lost. He went on a one-man crusade to make people aware of Pitt’s poetic talent. In doing so angered a number of writers including Miles Franklin and Nettie Palmer who felt their interests were being diminished. Hooton described Marie Pitt as ‘Henry Lawson in skirts.’



[img – Cartoon: Latham signs Crime Act]

It was during this period that chief Judge John Latham (note: see another significant Northcote woman – Ella Latham – wife of Sir John) signed the Crimes Act which made it easier to prosecute communists. But Marie was undaunted. Now she spent more time on her literary pursuits and helping up and coming writers.

In the late 1920s Maire Pitt, now in her fifties, was interviewed by the Catholic publication, *The Advocate*. Her beliefs whilst a little toned down, it's noted that she is disappointed by the slow progress in women's rights to be equal in all aspects of life. She recalls her earlier times,

"They were strenuous times ... to be a member of the Labour party was bad enough but to be a Socialist ..." ... *"For a long time I had hopes that women would bring about the social millennium, but the apathy among them is very discouraging ... Centuries of tradition have confined them to motherhood and the kitchen, and consequently there is appalling ignorance among modern women regarding social problems."*

In later years one of the favourite things the Pitt / O'Dowd couple would do, was to travel on bus tours interstate.

In 1939 Marie Pitt was now seventy and she was once again feted in the public sphere. Though war years intervened which reduced her limelight somewhat. After hostilities, selected poems were published in 1944. Though excising some of the more radical left wing poems including *The Keening*. A year later her poem *Ave Australia* won the ABC competition for a national anthem. Apparently on hearing the words of 'Advance Australia Fair' she stated 'I was so disgusted with it I wrote Ave Australia'. Unfortunately that same year, 1945, she suffered a debilitating stroke. She spent two and half years in hospital with the devoted O'Dowd visiting her daily. On 20 May 1948, aged 78 years she passed away at Corpus Christi.

Sadly, even in death there was disharmony. At Christi she had theoretically been converted back to Catholicism (this is highly questionable) and was buried a Catholic. This was in stark contrast to her stoic Unitarian beliefs with which O'Dowd shared. She deserved better. Bernd O'Dowd was to outlive her by five years. Still committed to his belief in 'anarchist communism' to the last – he died aged 87 in 1953. It is tragic to note that after his death much material was destroyed by his family (his wife?) including the letters of Marie Pitt.



[img – Monkey & Darwin]

An interesting Northcote connection. Apart from living only a couple of blocks away from the Carnegie Free Library on James St, Marie Pitt bequeathed a small bronze statuette, in 1948. It depicts a monkey holding a human skull sitting on a volume of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. The bronze was very rare and a similar one was owned by Lenin in Russia. It must have raised a few eyebrows within the conservative Northcote Council. Unfortunately and thankfully for the Council, the statue mysteriously disappeared sometime in November 1976. Bern Price, Marie's

nephew of Beaver's Rd, raised a reward of 200 pounds for the return of the statue in 1978. It was never claimed.

Despite their deaths both Marie's and Bernd's children carried the spark of energy. Pitt's daughter - Evaline Marie became an artist. One of O'Dowd's five sons formed the Industrial Workers of the World Club in 1908. Vondel O'Dowd, a teacher, planned to write Pitt's biography and was literary executor of his father's estate.



[img – Plaque]

There is a plaque at Bairnsdale library which was unveiled by Bernard O'Dowd in 1948 in honour of Marie Pitt.

Whilst her poetry is now rarely available, it is described as vigorous and melodious, though 'tinged with sentimentality'. The Australian Dictionary of Biography indicates that very little of her prose work has been published. Of seven Australian poetry book collection examined recently, only one had a single poem by Marie Pitt. Perhaps poetry editors feel that the sentimentality from the early twentieth

century no is relevant. Whether her left leaning politics was also a dampener seems unlikely in the present time. It was, however an issue whilst she was alive and during the 1950s. The poetry from the 1960s onwards was also much more freer and realistic. Pitt's writing then may have been seen as 'old fashioned'.

Further to her lessened impact in history is the destruction of her letters to O'Dowd which would may have given a wonderful insight into the 1920s to 1940s socialist movement in Melbourne. In addition there is the friendship with Harry Hooton. He died in 1961. It would be of great inters to look at their letters. Alas these are lost too. With these available more than likely there may be a deeper insight into her life and work.

A poem that encapsulates much of Marie Pitt's feminist intellect and sensitivity is '**The Enslavement**':

*Rail not at Mammon, helots of to-day,
Nor curse Bellona, goddess of the sword,
Nor Tyranny, of Toil meet overlord:
This is your covenant – "You must obey!"
Under its ban your helot-mothers lay;
Your sires, slave-born to slave-born mothers, poured
The gluttons' wine, or cringed for bed and board:*

Why murmur then? And whence your blank dismay?

*Not with red rite of sword on Strife's wan hill,
'Mid clash of arms and pomp of war's estate,
Was Freedom slain, and her strong sons laid low,
But in some wild red dawning long ago,
When Man, the savage, took his savage mate,
And beat, and bent, and broke her to his will.*

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