

Word Art: a blog on reading poetry and fiction

Dorothea Mackellar, "My Country"



Dorothea Mackellar OBE (1885 - 1968) was born in Sydney in 1885 to Sir Charles Mackellar, a surgeon and politician, and his wife Marion (nee Buckland). As the only daughter of a wealthy, elite Sydney family, she was encouraged in intellectual and artistic, as well as sporting, pursuits. She travelled widely with her parents, through Europe and especially Great Britain, and spent time at her family's country properties around Gunnedah in north-west New South Wales. By the time she was twenty, Mackellar was fluent in a number of European languages and had attended a number of lectures at the University of Sydney. She had begun writing in her teen years, and at nineteen wrote the poem for which she would become renowned, "My Country". The contrast Mackellar set up between the 'sunburnt country' and English landscape - 'The love of field and coppice/Of green and shaded lanes/Of ordered woods and gardens' - struck a chord with Australian readers, particularly in the context of World War I and the patriotic sentiments it inspired. In claiming 'my country' as a place that could be loved with a passion, despite its harshness, Mackellar voiced for white Australians a resonate sense of belonging, home and national pride. For contemporary readers the poem is uncannily prophetic in its imagery of flood and fires which increasingly affect many Australians, causing loss and suffering, but also defiance, heroism, and generosity in helping each other at times of crisis.

The love of field and coppice
Of green and shaded lanes,
Of ordered woods and gardens
Is running in your veins.
Strong love of grey-blue distance,
Brown streams and soft, dim skies
I know, but cannot share it,
My love is otherwise.

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror
The wide brown land for me!

The stark white ring-barked forests,
All tragic to the moon,
The sapphire-misted mountains,
The hot gold hush of noon,
Green tangle of the brushes
Where lithe lianas coil,
And orchids deck the tree-tops,
And ferns the warm dark soil.

Core of my heart, my country!
Her pitiless blue sky,
When, sick at heart, around us
We see the cattle die
But then the grey clouds gather,
And we can bless again
The drumming of an army,
The steady soaking rain.

Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the rainbow gold,
For flood and fire and famine
She pays us back threefold.
Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch, after many days,
The filmy veil of greenness
That thickens as we gaze ...

An opal-hearted country,
A wilful, lavish land
All you who have not loved her,
You will not understand
though Earth holds many splendours,
Wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country
My homing thoughts will fly.