

David McKee Wright, 1869 – 1928

Paul Hunt

David McKee Wright is one of New Zealand's most popular balladists. From an unsettled childhood in Ireland and England, and early life as a farmhand in New Zealand, Wright forged a career in the Congregational Church, and wrote verse and short stories on rural, political, and moral themes. Upon emigrating to Australia, he became a successful journalist and literary critic. In Australia he is considered to be part of an important literary culture surrounding the *Sydney Bulletin*. While not particularly popular with critics, Wright was a very popular with the public, and by all accounts a successful writer. Perhaps best remembered in Australia for his Irish verse, Wright wrote in many forms and genres. Wright is one of the few turn-of-the-century poets whose work still appears in New Zealand poetry anthologies.

David McKee Wright, born at Ballynaskeagh, County Down, in Ireland, on 6 August 1869, was the second son of the Reverend William Wright, a Presbyterian missionary, and his wife Annie McKee. Wright's mother had briefly returned to Ireland from mission work in Damascus, and soon after his birth, Wright's mother returned to Syria, leaving him in the care of his grandmother, Rebecca McKee. Wright looked back on his early childhood in Ireland favourably and remembered roaming about the fields of County Down and conversing with friends, farmers, and all types of people. Wright began school at the Glascar School in Ballynaskeagh.

In 1877, Wright's family, including his father, mother, older brother and sister, and two younger brothers, moved to London, taking a seven-year old David with them. Wright's mother died soon afterwards. England did not make a favourable impression upon the young Wright, he was especially dissatisfied with his father's marriage to Sophia Colyer Davison in 1880, and he suffered ill-health, requiring some years of home tutoring, and even ran away three times from his family to return to Ireland. Wright, however, recollected cheerful schooldays in London. He attended Pope's School, and then the Crystal Palace Engineering School, and it was during his early education that he developed his passion for poetry.

In 1887, Wright's parents sent him to live in New Zealand because he was diagnosed as having a lung disorder. When he immigrated to New Zealand, Wright lived with again with his uncle, David McKee, and his grandmother

who had already settled in Christchurch. He did not spend long with them. In 1888, he moved to Otago, and also spent some time as a rabbitier and shepherd in Southland. He also travelled to the Aparima River and Lake Manapouri. On 8 May 1890, while Wright was living in Otautau, the *Otago Witness* published his poem 'Manapouri'. In the following year, Wright was employed as a shepherd in Puketoi and during his time there contributed more than fifty poems to the *Otago Witness*, and was published in the Christchurch *Press* under the pseudonym 'Cleggs' before moving to Tabletops in the Hakataramea valley and working on Scobie Mackenzie's station in early 1894. During this time Wright wrote poems inspired by the New Zealand landscape, he wrote of people he met, and the jobs they performed. He romanticised the bush, the tussock-country and the campfire, and these themes, entrenched in classical forms, endeared him to the colonial New Zealand public.

While he was still living in the Hakataramea valley, Wright began to write prose fiction. His poems were still published in the *Otago Witness*, with greater frequency than before, but his short stories gained him wider acclaim. Although he won the *Otago Witness* Prize Story Competition on 17 Dec 1896 for 'Mates; A Tale of the Gold Coast', under the pseudonym 'Rimu', and published seven more short stories in the same weekly, Wright was better known in Otago for his poetry. It was in Canterbury that he was known for his short stories, which often appeared in the Christchurch *Weekly Press*.

In 1896, Wright published his first collection of poems, *Aorangi and other verses*. This collection was not well received. Early in 1897, Wright moved to Dunedin, with the encouragement and financial assistance of his father, and enrolled as a student at the University of Otago, and he won the Stuart Prize for poetry with the poem 'Queen Victoria, 1837: 1897'. Throughout 1897 Wright wrote another collection of verses, which appeared in the *Otago Witness* under the series title *Station Verses*. Wright published this series of poems at the end of the year in the collection *Station Ballads and other verses* (1897). Wright's friend Robert McSkimming ('Crockery Bob'), to whom the poem 'The Hawker's Cart' is dedicated, financed the publication of *Station Ballads*, and its release coincided with the Patearoa annual race-meeting day on 6 November 1897. The collection was popular, with half the edition selling out on the first day, and the remaining copies were all sold before the end of the month. *Station Ballads* established Wright as a New Zealand poet rather than just a local balladist. Another edition of *Station Ballads and other verses* was published in 1945, and it included some of Wright's more popular poems.

Wright continued to write prolifically throughout 1897 and published a poem in the *Otago Witness* nearly every week. During that year he published a thirty-two poem series called *Tussock and Asphalt Rhymes*, many of the poems deal with typical themes for Wright, but some reflect the tension he felt living in an urban environment. Seven of the *Tussock and Asphalt Rhymes* appear in a latter collection of poems called *Wisps of Tussock* (1900). In November and December that year Wright wrote a series of five short stories for the *Otago Witness* entitled *Station Sketches*.

At the end of 1897 after receiving only third class passes in his studies at Theological Hall, Wright undertook summer outreach duties relieving Presbyterian ministers in Alexandra and Clyde. In Alexandra he wrote a Jubilee Hymn to commemorate the Jubilee of the Otago Presbyterian Church. When Wright returned to Dunedin in early 1898, he did not continue his studies, but joined the Congregational Union and took up temporary charge of the Emmanuel Church in Oamaru.

During his time in Oamaru, Wright composed few new poems, but concentrated his efforts on his new appointment, writing new hymns and giving speaking tours in the surrounding districts. Wright openly criticised Oamaru's apathy and moral laxity, publicly opposed New Zealand's participation in the Boer War, and actively supported the North Otago Temperance movement. In February 1899 he became chairman of a local branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and in March of the same year became the president of the North Otago Christian Endeavour Union in May 1899, and campaigned against sweating. On 3 August 1899 Wright married Elizabeth Couper in Dunedin.

During 1899 Wright continued writing prose fiction, but not in the form for which he was known. He wrote two novel-length ecclesiastical romances for use in evening services, and he wrote a four-part novel, *The Lost Prima Donna*. Before the end of 1899, membership at his Oamaru Church had fallen to 37 and despite Wright's vigour the Congregational Union of New Zealand closed the Church, offering Wright the parish of Newtown in Wellington.

Before Wright left Oamaru he published his third collection of poems, *Wisps of Tussock* (1900), with the assistance of his friend Andrew Fraser, a bookseller. By May 1900, Wright had moved to Wellington where he preached under the supervision of Reverend Reed Glasson. Despite financial difficulties and the birth of his son, David Wright, on 15 September 1900, Wright

managed to submit work to the *Free Lance*, and publish his fourth collection of poems, *New Zealand Chimes* (1900). This collection was produced as a Christmas booklet, and included the popular poem 'Wellington'. It sold well, and an extra-large-format edition was published that was signed by the author. The popularity of 'Wellington' was such that the poem appeared in black and gold lettering on the glass doors of two Wellington trams.

Wright continued in the Newtown parish until he resigned in February 1901 to take up a Nelson pastorate in May of the same year. He remained with the Nelson Church until June 1905 when he resigned because his motion for State control of the Liquor trade was voted against at the annual general meeting of the Congregational Union in Christchurch.

Wright returned to writing, focusing on journalism, and in 1906 bought an old press, and began editing and printing his own weekly, the *Nelson Times*. Wright produced twelve issues before he changed the name to *Te Rauparaha*. The new paper, printed irregularly, was pro-Labour and exhibited Wright's continuing endeavour for social reform, even after he broke with the Church.

Wright began publishing his work further afield, and on 28 June 1906, Wright's first contribution to the Sydney *Bulletin* appeared under the pseudonym 'Maori Mac'. His article commented on the death of Richard Seddon. Wright continued to submit work to the *Bulletin*, including short stories, also under the pseudonym 'Maori Mac'.

In 1907, Wright became a Parliamentary reporter for the *New Zealand Mail*, writing a column entitled 'The House of Talk' using the pseudonym 'Cleggs'. During this time, Wright also freelanced for the Wellington *Dominion*. Despite his industry in writing, Wright faced bankruptcy by the end of 1907, and his family's belongings were seized and sold to pay his debts. Soon afterwards, he left his wife and moved to the Baton Valley, south of Motueka. Not staying for long, Wright returned to Wellington and remained there, once again as a freelance writer, until 1910.

In 1910, Wright immigrated to Australia, settling in Sydney in May. He began work as a freelance writer for *Fairplay*, the *Sun*, and the *Sydney Mail*. But he submitted literary articles to many other publications, most frequently, the Sydney *Bulletin*. Wright often used his own name when submitting journalistic verse, but also used many pseudonyms (Maori Mac, Gillette, Benjamin Kidd, McCallum, Justin Thyme, Pearl Smith, Anthesis, Aaron

McHebron, Alice Nevertire, N. S. Wales, P. Jackson-Heads, G. Almighty, Tot. Abstinence, S. Toney-Broke, Aunt Angeult, William I of Geelong, Vanity Porridge, Margaret Cathpole, Ivy Twister, Grace Glory, and Buss King) but he wrote under four main ones. 'Pat O'Maori' and 'Mary McCommonwealth' appeared in the second half of 1910, and 'Curses O'Moses' and 'George Street' appeared in 1911. Wright contributed regularly using all of these pseudonyms, and including his own name (or initials) they account for nearly fifteen hundred contributions (mostly in verse) to the *Bulletin* between his first publication in 1907, to his death in 1928. At the time of publication of Wright's work, his various pseudonyms were not widely known, and sometime three or four of the main pseudonyms would appear in the same issue of the *Bulletin*.

In Australia, Wright's style of writing changed from that which he wrote in New Zealand. He began to explore traditional forms and often wrote on classical and Irish themes, looking back to his youth in Ireland. Wright viewed this kind of writing as his 'serious' work, and often used his own name when publishing it. He also wrote a great deal of political and social satirical verse, he viewed this as his 'light' work, and commonly signed it with one of his various pseudonyms. Aside from this distinction between his 'serious' and 'light' work, there seems little to separate the styles that Wright employed when writing under different pen names.

Wright lived, and had four sons with Beatrice Florence Osbourne from 1913 until she left him in 1918. During this time he became editor of *Fairplay*, and began working as a full-time journalist for the Sydney *Bulletin*. In 1916 he became the literary editor of the famous Red Page of the *Bulletin*.

From 1918, Wright lived with the poet and actress, Zora Cross, at Glenbrook, Blue Mountains, with whom he had two daughters. Cross championed Wright's poetry and tried unsuccessfully to publish collected works after his death. In 1918, however, Wright published his only collection of poems written in Australia. *An Irish Heart* (1918) contained some of Wright's poems on Irish themes written after 1913. *An Irish Heart* was received positive critical comments in Australia, and his reputation as an Australian poet relied largely on this collection until his death. Also in 1918, Wright completed his longest satirical poem, 'Apollo in George Street', which is perhaps even the only example of such a work during that period of Australian literature. The poem, 'Apollo in George Street' remains unpublished, but provides insight into contemporary writers, and artists from one in an ideal position to criticise them, the editor of the Red Page.

Up until his resignation from the Sydney *Bulletin*, Wright continued to write prolifically. Wright himself was most proud of his later poems, particularly those on classical and Irish themes, and he experimented with traditional forms later in his career. In 1920, he published, in the Sydney *Bulletin*, a sequence of fifteen sonnets called a 'Crown of Sonnets', in which the last 'Master Sonnet' is entirely composed of the first lines from the first fourteen sonnets. In addition to other structural and rhyme constraints, it is a remarkable achievement to produce a 'Master Sonnet' that makes any sense, let alone forms a conclusion to the logic of the sequence. This sonnet sequence displays Wright's true skill as a poet.

In 1925, Wright edited an anthology of Henry Lawson's poetry. Wright was a trusted friend of Lawson, and the collaborative effort led to some changes from Lawson's earlier versions of his poems. This practice led Wright to be severely denounced by critics and perhaps harmed his own future reputation as a poet.

In 1926, due to declining health, Wright left the *Bulletin*, but he still wrote copiously from his home in Glenbrook. Before he died on 5 Feb 1928, he completed a novel, *Luta of Lutetia*, which was serialised posthumously in the Sydney *Morning Herald* in 1930. Cross entered another of his novels, *Julian the Apostate*, in the Sydney *Bulletin* after Wright's death, it was commended. Indeed, it is also a tribute to his popularity that Wright's verse continued to be published in the Sydney *Bulletin* for five years following his death.

During his lifetime, Wright was never appreciated by his contemporaries for the sheer volume and range of his work that appeared in print. In New Zealand he was best known for his contribution to the rural ballad tradition. In Australia he was best known for his Irish poetry, and by critics as the editor of the *Poetical Works of Henry Lawson*. He was, by any standards, a remarkably prolific writer, with a colourful personal life. Despite his unsettled childhood, background as a working man turned clergyman, and career as a professional writer with a bohemian lifestyle, he wrote using conventional forms and themes, that in the eyes of critics did not set him apart from other writers of his time. Now, however, as literary historians rediscover and attribute more works to Wright, they are becoming more aware of his versatility and passion as a writer in early Australia and New Zealand.

LINKS

[1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand](#)

New Zealand Electronic Text Centre

Poem Hunter

Poems at 'Squidoo'

Poems at Old Poetry

Dictionary of New Zealand Biography

BOOKS

Aorangi and Other Verses. Dunedin, Mills, Dick & Co., 1896.

Station Ballads and other Verses. Dunedin, J. G. Sawell (Wise's), 1897.

Wisps of Tussock: New Zealand Rhymes. Oamaru, Andrew Fraser, 1900.

New Zealand Chimes. Wellington, W. J. Lankshear, 1900.

An Irish Heart. Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1918.

Station Ballads and Other Verses. Ed. Robert Solway. Auckland: John, A. Lee, 1945.

OTHER

King, H. B. *Bill's Philosophy and Other Verses*. Intro. David McKee Wright. Nelson: Alfred G. Betts, 1903.

Lawson, Henry. *Poetical Works of Henry Lawson*. Pref. and intro. David McKee Wright. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1925.

REFERENCES

Curnow, Allen. *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-84*. Ed. Peter Simpson. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987.

Jackson, MacD. P. and Elizabeth Caffin. 'Poetry'. In *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, 2nd ed. Ed. Terry Sturm. Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp 394-524.

Jones, Ronald. 'Wright, David McKee 1870-1928'. In *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, volume 3, edited by A. H. McLintock. Wellington: R. E. Owen Government Printer, 1966, pp 690-691.

McQueen, Harvey. 'Wright, David McKee 1869-1928'. In *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*. Eds. Roger Robinson, & Nelson Wattie. Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp 597.

Marshall, Teresia. *New Zealand Literature in the Sydney Bulletin, 1880-1930*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1995.

Sharkey, Michael. 'Apollo in George Street: A Reappraisal of David McKee Wright'. *Southerly*, 46 (December 1986): 444-455.

Sharkey, Michael. 'David McKee Wright as Literary Editor of the Bulletin'. In *A History of the Book in Australia 1891-1945: A national culture in a colonised market*. Eds. Martyn Lyons and John Arnold. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press 2001, pp 49-50.

Sharkey, Michael. 'David McKee Wright: By Any Name A Virtuoso'. *Notes and Furphies*, 12 (April 1984): 9.

Sharkey, Michael. 'David McKee Wright, Maorilander'. *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 10 (1992): 35-55.

- Sharkey, Michael. 'Wright, David McKee 1869-1928'. In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 12. Ed. John Ritchie. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp. 584-595.
- Sharkey, Michael. 'Wright, David McKee 1869-1928'. In *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* volume 2. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ltd and the Department of Internal Affairs, 1993. pp 589-591.
- Wright, David McKee. *Station Ballads and Other Verses*. Ed. Robert Solway. Auckland: John, A. Lee, 1945.
- 'Wright, David McKee 1869-1928'. In *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, 2nd edition. Eds. William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton, and Barry Andrews. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994.