

Classic Poetry Series

Peter McArthur
- poems -

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Peter McArthur(10 March 1866 - 10 October 1924)

Peter Gilchrist McArthur (March 10, 1866 - October 10, 1924) was a Canadian poet, writer, and farmer.

Life

McArthur was born in Ekfrid, in Middlesex County, Upper Canada (now Ontario), to Peter and Catherine (McLennan) McArthur, immigrants from Scotland. He was educated at Strathroy Collegiate Institute and later at University College, University of Toronto. While in university he contributed to Grip magazine, and in 1889 he left to become a reporter with the Toronto Daily Mail.

McArthur became assistant editor of Truth magazine in March 1895, and editor-in-chief that August. As editor of Truth from 1895 to 1897, he published work by Roberts, Carman, Stephen Leacock, and Duncan Campbell Scott. (One of the poems McArthur published was ["The Piper of Arll" by Scott, which was read by a teenaged John Masefield and which awakened Masefield's interest in poetry.)

In September 1895 McArthur married Mabel C. Waters, of Niagara Falls, Ontario, who would bear him four sons and one daughter.

From 1902 to 1904 the McArthurs lived in London, England, where McArthur contributed to Punch and to the Review of Reviews. In 1904 they returned to New York, where McArthur became a partner in the publishing firm of McArthur and Ryder.

Writing

R.H. Hathaway: "Perhaps the first thing that strikes the reader of his poetry—and his prose as well, for the matter of that—is that it possesses that rare enough quality,—zest. Mr. McArthur is no mere æsthete, no lackadaisical dilettante, but is alive to his finger tips; and all his writings fairly tingle with life. The next thing one perceives is that a strong human feeling runs through his work. Mr. McArthur is above all things else a human being, and a lover of all things human. But he loves nature, too, and manages to get very close to her: we can fairly smell the good brown earth in every out-of-doors poem of his. Naturalness is another of his qualities. He is ever himself: affectation of all kinds is anathema to him. His work is marked also by a lambent, playful humour, which, however, can become sardonic enough when occasion requires."

A Confession

Dear little boy, with wondering eyes
That for the light of knowledge yearn,
Who have such faith that I am wise
And know the things that you would learn.
Though oft I shake my head and smile
To hear your childish questions flow,
I must not meet your faith with guile;
I cannot tell, I do not know.

Dear little boy with eager heart,
Forever on the quest of truth,
Your riddles oft are past my art
To answer to your tender youth.
But some day you will understand
The things that now I cannot say,
When life shall take you by the hand
And lead you on its wondrous way.

Dear little boy with hand in mine,
Together through the world we fare,
Where much that I would fain divine
I have not yet the strength to bear.
Like you with riddling words I ask,
Like you I hold another hand,
And haply when I do my task,
I, too, shall understand.

Peter McArthur

A Thaw

The farm-house fire is dull and black,
The trailing smoke rolls white and low
Along the fields till by the wood
It banks and floats unshaken, slow;
The scattering sounds seem near and loud,
The rising sun is clear and white,
And in the air a mystery stirs
Of wintry hosts in coward flight.

Anon the south-wind breathes across
The frozen earth its bonds to break,
Till at the call of life returned
It softly stirs but half awake.
The cattle clamor in their stalls,
The house-dog barks, he knows not why,
The cock crows by the stable door,
The snow-birds, sombre-hued, go by.

The busy housewife on the snow
To bleach lays out her linen store,
And scolds because with careless feet
The children track the spotless floor.
With nightfall comes the slow warm rain,
The purl of waters fills the air,
And save where roll the gleaming drifts
The fields lie sullen, black and bare.

Peter McArthur

All In

Not on your life, Bob; not on your life! The Muse salutes you!

And if there still be virtue left in catgut,

In brass or wood, she'll sound a stave that's worthy

The squarest, hardest hitting slugger that ever pawed
the sawdust!

The man with the wallop! '

All in!'

Not on your life!

Your place is with the veteran heroes, with the elder
statesmen.

Another may wear your laurels, but cannot blur your
record!

Hero of twenty score hard-fought battles,

An in-fighter who gave and took with a joyous ferocity!

Who fought manfully and as manfully lost!

Move up there, you Immortals!

Make room for a gladiator—not for a grafter!

Here is a tall fellow of his hands—whose hands are
clean!

A rough-jointed, red-headed, slant-browed troglodyte!

Such a one as might have wielded the cestus

Before applauding Rome!

Make room, I say!

While we who have roared and catcalled by the ringside,

Whooped, yelled, howled, and trampled on our hats

As he grinned back at us in his hour of triumph—

A freckled, fierce, loose lipped satyr—

Take off' our hats to add state to his exit. '

All in!'

Not on your life, Bob!

You have fought your last battle,

But it was the last of many,

And though lost, was not without glory.

Step up to your place with the Immortals

And live long to awe the youngsters

With the tales of your prowess.

Peter McArthur

An Indian Wind Song

The wolf of the winter wind is swift,
And hearts are still and cheeks are pale,
When we hear his howl in the ghostly drift
As he rushes past on a phantom trail;
And all the night we huddle and fear,
For we know that his path is the path of Death,
And the flames burn low, when his steps are near,
And the dim hut reeks with his grave-cold breath.

The fawn of the wind of the spring is shy,
Her light feet rustle the sere, white grass,
The trees are roused as she races by,
In the pattering rain we hear her pass;
And the bow unstrung we cast aside,
While we winnow the golden, hoarded maize,
And the earth awakes with a thrill of pride
To deck her beauty for festal days.

The hawk of the summer wind is proud,
She circles high at the throne of the sun;
When the storm is fierce her scream is loud,
And the scorching glance of her eye we shun;
And often times, when the sun is bright,
A silence falls on the choirs of song,
And the partridge shrinks in a wild affright,
Where a searching shadow swings along.

The hound of the autumn wind is slow,
He loves to bask in the heat and sleep,
When the sun through the drowsy haze bends low,
And frosts from the hills through the starlight creep;
But oftentimes he starts in his dreams,
When the howl of the winter wolf draws nigh,
Then lazily rolls in the gold-warm beams,
While the flocking birds to the south drift by.

Peter McArthur

Aspiration

How should I be the master of my ways
When every nerve is vibrant to the sweep
Of dreams that fill the measure of my days—
Too rare to lose and past all power to keep.
How should I know what it were well to do
When every path has its alluring strain,
Each towering crest its world-revealing view
Of realms for him that has the will to reign;
And while I waver, lo! this earthly shard,
Wherein is breathed the swift compelling fire,
Breaks with the ardor it was shaped to guard.
Yet, ever striving, humbly I aspire
Ere all be spent, with reverent hands to light
A guiding star on some hope-kindling height.

Peter McArthur

Birds Of Passage

When the maples flame with crimson
And the nights are still with frost,
Ere the summer's luring beauty
Is in autumn glory lost,
Through the marshes and the forests
An imperious summons flies,
And from all the dreaming north-land
The wild birds flock and rise.

From streams no oar hath rippled
And lakes that waft no sail,
From reaches vast and lonely
That know no hunter's trail,
The clamor of their calling
And the whistling of their flight
Fill all the day with marvel,
And with mystery, the night.

As ebb along the ocean
The great obedient tides,
So wave on wave they journey
Where an ancient wisdom guides;
A-through the haze of autumn
They vanish down the wind,
With the summer world before them
And the crowding storms behind.

Peter McArthur

Consecration

It is no bondage to be free to give
Our all to Him who first so freely gave,
That in his living we may ever live;
For, losing all, the all we lose we save.
It is not folly to become so wise
That earthly wisdom shall be known a snare,
Nor are they blind who have the light to rise
Where science stumbles in its dark despair.
The seed corrupted in the humid soil
Sends yet its flower to the bewildering sun:
Strong without will and perfect without toil,
Helpless yet doing all that may be done.'
So we, through God, though doing naught, do all,
Nor grope in darkness nor in weakness fall.

Peter McArthur

Corn Planting

The earth is awake and the birds have come,
There is life in the beat of the breeze,
And the basswood tops are alive with the hum
And the flash of the hungry bees;
The frogs in the swale in concert croak,
And the glow of the spring is here,
When the bursting leaves on the rough old oak
Are as big as a red squirrel's ear.

From the ridge-pole dry the corn we pluck,
Ears ripe and yellow and sound,
That were saved apart with the red for luck,
The best that the huskers found;
We will shell them now, for the Indian folk
Say, 'Plant your corn without fear
When the bursting leaves on the rough old oak
Are as big as a red squirrel's ear.'

No crow will pull and no frost will blight,
Nor grub cut the tender sprout,
No rust will burn and no leaves turn white,
But the stalks will be tall and stout;
And never a weed will have power to choke,
Or blasting wind to sear,
The corn that we plant when the leaves of the oak
Are as big as a red squirrel's ear.

To the Birds

HOW dare you sing such cheerful notes?
You show a woful lack of taste;
How dare you pour from happy throats
Such merry songs with raptured haste,
While all our poets wail and weep,
And readers sob themselves to sleep?

'Tis clear to me, you've never read
The turgid tomes that Ibsen writes,
Or mourned with Tolstoi virtue dead,

Nor over Howells pored o' nights;

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For you are glad with all your power;
For shame! Go study Schopenhauer.

You never sing save when you feel
The ecstasy of thoughtless joy;
All silent through the boughs you steal
When storms or fears or pains annoy;
With bards 'tis quite a different thing,
The more they ache the more they sing.

All happiness they sadly shirk,
And from all pleasure hold aloof,
And are so tearful when they work
They write on paper waterproof,
And on each page express a yearn
To fill a cinerary urn.

Go, little birds, it gives me pain
To hear your happy melodies!
My plaudits you can never gain
With old and worn-out tunes like these;
More up-to-date your songs must be
Ere you can merit praise from me.

Peter McArthur

Courage

The dead are buried facing to the sun,
In foolish epitaphs their faith is told,
And yet they die without a victory won,
Leaving a world in folly growing old.
Now why should we among these futile graves
Proclaim the truth to dead or living dust,
Bow to the earth like overburdened slaves ?—
Re-born the freemen of a higher trust!
Have words a substance whereon light may shine ?
Can beauty glow upon a trembling sound ?
Can aught but deeds foreshadow the divine ?
Or save in symbols can the truth be found ?
Let no weak doubt defeat your eager hand;
For all must heed though few may understand.

Peter McArthur

De Profundis

Not yet are deeds fruition of my thought,
Nor is this body symbol of my soul,
For evil ever in this life is wrought
That shuns the will and its divine control.
Surely I shall not be forever weak,
Halting and stumbling on the chosen way,
Blinded by the pure and perfect light I seek
Upon the threshold of eternal day.
I do not mourn discredit to my fame
Who smile at Time and his confining shores; '
Tis this provokes the burning blush of shame:
The flesh still grovels though the spirit soars—
But my heart's anguish who can understand,
Or stay my folly with a guiding hand ?

Peter McArthur

Dolce Far Niente

Is life worth loafing ? Come, recline with me
And lazily this fragrant afternoon
We'll weigh the idle theme. I often think,
If with protean versatility
I might luxuriously loaf my days,
I would no longer quarrel with the powers
That called me forth. I would not be a man,
Nor god, nor beast, nor bird, nor anything;
Yet each whene'er I listed.

I would rise
And, as an eagle, float in circles slow,
That swing too wide and high for mortal ken,
Or as a flesh-gorged leopard, in the sun
Bask by a rocky den, or as a god
Of some hushed sea lie sweltering on the sand,
While crawled the servile waves to kiss my feet.
Yet with environment I would not keep
Strict correspondence, but with every whim
Would loll where'er, whene'er I pleased.

Before Jove's throne, upon Olympus stretched
With hands beneath my head, with careless eyes
Exploring the vasty, vaulted heavens, I'd munch
The rustic straw, or in the fatted form
Of some church-going citizen would yawn
While Hermes or Apollo spake.

Again
Like that famed, errant Babylonian king,
In horn-deep pastures I would graze and stray;
And under odorous, knoll-crowning trees
At noonday ruminate the leisurely cud.
When all aware of each languorous change
I longed for sleep, with drooping wings I'd sink
Adown the ether till some gloom I found,
Where cool and mornless night would woo my soul
To dreamless rest. When I awaked again
Some newer charm of indolence I'd find.

Ah, friend, for living life has little worth—
But for such loafing! Let us dream of it.

Peter McArthur

Dreams

If every thought shall weigh in the award,
And every dream as if fulfilled shall stand,
Who may complain or deem the justice hard
That heaven shall deal when his account is scanned ?
The dreams I shattered when with mortal power
I strove to give them form and worthy act
Shall weigh against me in that searching hour
For all their promise in fulfilment lacked;
But if upon the other scale shall lie
The pure, resplendent raptures of my youth,
Of deeds pre-visionsed, born of purpose high,
Undimmed by earth and lit by living truth,
Aspiring dreams shall gloss what ill befel,
For he whose thoughts are pure hath builded well.

Peter McArthur

Duty

If 'Yea' and 'Nay' were words enough for Him,
Who taught beyond the lessons of all teaching,
With works nor Time nor Envy can bedim,
How vain the burden of our foolish preaching ?
We but betray the spirit's citadel,
And waste on idle air the strength conferred,
When life's high message we essay to tell
In aught so faithless as an uttered word.
Deeds are the right and only alphabet
Wherewith to teach what all the world should know;
But still the tongue will evermore forget,
And strive with sounds the perfect truth to show.
Yet ever onward we must bravely press
Till love through life reveals its loveliness.

Peter McArthur

Earthborn

Hurled back, defeated, like a child I sought
The loving shelter of my native fields,
Where Fancy still her magic sceptre wields,
And still the miracles of youth are wrought. '
Twas here that first my eager spirit caught
The rapture that relentless conflict yields,
And, scorning peace and the content that shields,
Took life's wild way, unguarded and untaught.
Dear Mother Nature, not in vain we ask
Of thee for strength! The visioned victories
Revive my heart, and golden honors gleam':
For here, once more, while in thy love I bask,
My soul puts forth her rapid argosies
To the uncharted ports of summer dream.

Peter McArthur

Growth

The dumb earth yearns for the expressive seed,
The fruit fulfilled gives ear to her desire
And she but conscious of her bitter need,
In vernal beauty doth again aspire.
The fruit perfected wooes the seeing eye,
The eye demands it that the body grow;
The soul, aspiring to the Most High,
Demands the body seeking strength to know.
And He that forged the all-embracing chain
That binds us to him lest we fall, undone,
What we may bear of what we seek to gain
Accords in love and when the goal is won
Of perfect peace and poised self-control,
Lo, God himself has voice through such a soul!

Peter McArthur

Heartsease

In some strange way God understands
Her dreaming lips were fondly pressed,
The playful touch of childish hands
Her wan cheek lingeringly caressed.

With joy she woke, but to her heart
A grief of loss the waking gave;
She rose to live her lonely part—
A simple woman true and brave.

And all the day she softly sung
Low crooning airs that mothers sing,
For to her weary heart there clung
The peace that childish kisses bring.

Peter McArthur

In Oblivan

Come, friend, there's going to be a merry meeting
After the play. Our masks we'll throw aside,
And after chaff and chat and friendly greeting
Our glasses fill and all, like cronies tried,
Drink draughts whose richness was so devil-cheating.
The ancients drank until their flasks were dried,
Then lost the art of making more such wine;
And we'll on long-forgotten viands dine.

Who will be there ?' you ask. Why, you and I
And all good fellows who were never great;
No warrior there will roll commanding eye;
No statesman weary with affairs of weight;
No prosy sage to proselyte will try;
No bard will drone; no orator will prate;
To pine in pompous glory they have gone,
But we'll be merry in Oblivion.

The watchword of that banquet hall's 'Forgotten,'
And if forgotten, why, we will forget
Our foolish dreams, the mocking goals we sought in
The days when hope could lure and failure fret;
The weary days when all our souls were caught in
The snare of life that like a tangling net
Holds us in agony and durance till
The spoiler stretches forth his hand to kill.

Methinks that there, my friend, both you and I
Can fleet away eternity content;
No curious fool into our lives can pry
And moralize on how our days were spent;
And soon, how soon! the names that flare on high
Will wane and with the closing night be blent;
For while we revel in Oblivion
The great themselves must join us one by one.

Peter McArthur

Life

Dear God, I thank Thee for this resting place,
This fleshly temple where my soul may dwell,
And, like an anchorite within his cell,
Learn all Thy love and grow to perfect grace.
Yet, while the veil still hides me from Thy face,
Give me the light to know that all is well,
With guiding truth my erring fears dispel,
Be Thou the rock on which my faith I base.
Thy guest, not captive, to my visioned goal
I soar beyond the memory of strife,
Upborn and shielded by Thy power benign:
Thou art the strength of my unfaltering soul,
And from the vantage of this mortal life
The freedom of the infinite is mine.

Peter McArthur

Man

He marks his shadow in the sun,
His form is fair, his dream is proud;
But shadow, form, and dream are one
And vanish like an empty cloud.

The graven cliffs have crumbled down,
The temples worn to drifting sand;
His deeds with fame he could not crown
With all the cunning of his hand.

The idle and forgetful air
Has heard his boast, has borne his woe;
The night has seen his cities flare
And holds no gleam their place to show.

Within this crystal sphere of light,
Where soaring constellations flame,
He has no skill his deeds to write
And has no art to show his fame.

On things of Time alone can man
For years of Time record his pride;
On nothing of eternal span
Will aught that he has sealed abide.

Peter McArthur

Parents Plea

My little boy is eight years old,
He goes to school each day;
He doesn't mind the tasks they set—
They seem to him but play.
He heads his class at raffia work,
And also takes the lead
At making dinky paper boats—
But I wish that he could read.

They teach him physiology,
And, O, it chills our hearts
To hear our prattling innocent
Mix up his inward parts.
He also learns astronomy
And names the stars by night—
Of course he's very up-to-date,
But I wish that he could write.

They teach him things botanical,
They teach him how to draw,
He babbles of mythology
And gravitation's law;
And the discoveries of science
With him are quite a fad,
They tell me he's a clever boy,
But I wish that he could add.

Peter McArthur

Questionings

Laughter and Silence for a sword and shield!
O aching heart, what war is this you wage ?
What part have you upon this furious field
Where mailed pride and reckless folly rage ?
Though skilled your fencing in the mimic strife,
What is its triumph but a shallow race ?
What can it stead you in the lists of life
Where Envy levels at a smiling face ?
Is there no answer ? Then, if Hope abide,
Let still your shield be guard to Peace or Pain;
Kept virgin from the blazonry of pride—
Free from heraldic boast or earthly stain—
And haply when this shadowed coil is done
Its field will mirror the victorious sun.

Peter McArthur

Reticence

We may not babble unto alien ears
The truth revealed, nor show to heedless eyes
The visioned beauty, lest with shame and tears
We mourn our folly—and with futile sighs.
For words are weak, and every form of sense
Wherewith in Time we tell our hopes and needs.
To do aright is to have recompense,
And highest thought is ever told in deeds;
And He, upon whose mighty arm we lean,
Is silent, save in works of love and power—
Most Merciful, enthroned in the Unseen,
He tries yet shields us in our mortal hour.
So faint not thou, for He who gave the will
The strength will give, and will Himself fulfil.

Peter McArthur

Shakespeare

I may not tell what hidden springs I find
Of living beauty in this deathless page,
Lest the dull world, that chooses to be blind,
Mock me to shame or lash me in its rage.
Alas for me that am a thing of dreams
Without the skill to show where others shine—
Because I hold their truth a thing that seems
While worse than seeming seems all truth of mine.
And yet let others on his music dote,
Or burnish every line with housewife care,
With glutton learning get his words by rote
And fail to find the spirit prisoned there!
For while I read, as thrilled by fire I start
To feel the pulsing of the poet's heart.

Peter McArthur

Silence

I

Toiling through ruined temple-halls, where Time
Had dwelt with Havoc, eager searchers found,
With shattered idols that bestrewed the ground,
An image strange, of lineaments sublime.
No god was he of rapine or of crime;
With ample brows his brooding face was crowned;
But lips and eyes were curiously bound
With golden circlets hoar with ageless grime.

One who was skilled in runes the gravings read,
And learned the wondrous image was the god
Of endless Silence. The searchers mutely bowed,
And mourned that faith so lofty should be dead;
And I their prone idolatry applaud
When strife and tumult in my paths are loud.

II

Beyond the search of sun or wandering star,
In that deep cincture of eternal night
That shrouds and stays this orb'd flare of light
Where many a god hath wheeled his griding car,
Silence is brooding, patient and afar,
Secure and steadfast in his primal right,
Reconquering slowly, with resistless might,
Dominions lost in immemorial war.
The thronged suns are paling to their doom,
The constellations waver, and a breath
Shall blur them all into eternity;
Then Ancient Silence in oblivious gloom
Shall reign—where holds this dream of Time and
Death
Like some brief bubble in a shoreless sea.

Peter McArthur

Solace

When friends forsake and fortune in despite
Of Thy rich bounty strips me to the wind,
With eye undimmed I mark their faithless flight
Because in Thee a refuge still I find.
To them Thy love I may not tell nor teach
Lest they bemock not me, but Thee through me;
What Thou dost give I may not give to speech
Because in deeds my speech must ever be.
O let me live so that my life will show
That I have treasure that they know not of,
So if through envy they would seek to know
And rob my secret they will learn Thy love:
For thus the glory will be ever Thine
And the reward of faithful service mine.

Peter McArthur

Sugar Weather

When snow-balls on the horses' hoofs
And the wind from the south blows warm,
When the cattle stand where the sunbeams beat
And the noon has a dreamy charm,
When icicles crash from the dripping eaves
And the furrows peep black through the snow,
Then I hurry away to the sugar bush,
For the sap will run, I know.

With auger and axe and spile and trough
To each tree a visit I pay,
And every boy in the country-side
Is eager to help to-day.
We roll the backlogs into their place,
And the kettles between them swing,
Then gather the wood for the roaring fire
And the sap in pailfuls bring.

A fig for your arches and modern ways,
A fig for your sheet-iron pan,
I like a smoky old kettle best
And I stick to the good old plan;

We're going to make sugar and taffy to-night
On the swing pole under the tree,
And the girls and the boys for miles around
Are all sworn friends to me.

The hens are cackling again in the barn,
And the cattle beginning to bawl,
And neighbours, who long have been acting cool,
Now make a forgiving call;
For there's no love-feast like a taffy-pull,
With its hearty and sticky fun,
And I know the whole world is at peace with me,
For the sap has commenced to run.

Summum Bonum

How blest is he that can but love and do
And has no skill of speech nor trick of art
Wherewith to tell what faith approveth true
And show for fame the treasures of his heart.
When wisely weak upon the path of duty
Divine accord hath made his footing sure
With humble deeds he builds his life to beauty,
Strong to achieve and patient to endure.
But they that in the market-place we meet,
Each with his trumpet and his noisy faction,
Are leaky vessels, pouring on the street
The truth they know ere it hath known its action.
Yet which think ye, in His benign regard,
Or words or deeds shall merit the reward ?

Peter McArthur

The End Of The Drought

Last night we marked the twinkling stars,
This morn no dew revived the grass,
And oft across the parching fields
We see the dusty eddies pass;
The eager hawk forgets to swing
And scream across the burning sky,
And from the oak's slow-dying crest
Sends forth a strange and plaintive cry.

The geese on unaccustomed wings
Flap wildly in ungainly flight,
The peacock's fierce defiant scream
Scatters the fowls in wild affright,
The crows are barking in the woods,
The maple leaves their silver show,
The cattle sniff the coming storm,
Then toss their heads and softly low.

And now along the hazy west
The swiftly building clouds uprear;
High overhead the winds are loud,
The thunder rolls and grumbles near;
The housewife trims the leaky eaves,
The farmer frets of lodging grain,
Till all the world, rejoicing, drinks
The long-denied, long-prayed-for rain.

Peter McArthur

The Innocents

To make perfect the heaven of mothers
The little children die,
For what care they for the praise of God
Who have sung a lullaby?

The arms that have ached with nursing
Would ache with their emptiness
Were there no little children
To fondle and caress.

And while the saints and angels
Sing loud in adoring throngs,
God hears the mothers and children
Singing their crooning songs.

Peter McArthur

The Ocean Liner

Like some bewildered monster of the deep,
Groping to freedom through the baffling tide,
She blunders forth, while nuzzling at her side
The bustling harbor craft about her creep.
Anon she feels her iron pulses leap,
And, symbol of the age's mastering pride,
Looks out to where the ocean stretches wide,
Scorning the fears that in its mystery sleep.

All day with headlong and undoubting haste,
And all the night upon her path she flames
Like some weird shape from olden errantry;
And when some wafted wanderer of the waste
A storm-worn pennant dips afar, proclaims
With raucous voice her strong supremacy.

Peter McArthur

The Prodigal

Last night the boy came back to me again,
The laughing boy, all-credulous of good—
Long lost, far-wandered in the ways of men,
He came and roused me with an olden mood.
He came the lover and enthusiast,
Shook off my years, and with enlightened eyes
Smiled at the shadow that the world had cast,
And looked at life with all the old surprise;
And I, the slave of patience, took him in,
Gave him my heart and bade him welcome home,
Thrilled with his dreams of all I yet may win—
Allured again in golden paths to roam,
And now I know life has no greater joy
Than, having lived, to be once more a boy.

Peter McArthur

The Salt Marshes

There was a light upon the sea that made
Familiar things mysterious, which to teach,
With inarticulate, alluring speech,
The living wind with lispings tongue essayed.
O'er sand and weed and spongy moss I strayed
And lifeless, orient shells, musing on each;
While casting nets with ever wider reach
A fisher plied his immemorial trade.
A sea-bird winged the aerial solitude
Searching the deep for his appointed dole,
Where his wide-wandering flocks the ocean feeds;
And with the day's full orb'd strength indued,
At one with all, by all illumed, my soul
Pulsed to the rhythmus of immortal deeds.

Peter McArthur

The Shaw Memorial

The chiselled fineness we can but surmise;
All that is delicate in form and mould
To-day has vanished under fold on fold
Of crystal whiteness that upon it lies.
But still against the storm with blinded eyes
The warriors lean, invincible and bold,
Like some stern legion, in Cimmerian cold
By Death transfigured, on a high emprise.

And so methinks heroic deeds will show,
Graved on the tablets of Eternity—
Blurred by Oblivion, but instinct with power—
Till God's rewarding light shall strongly glow
And the benign, all-seeing eye shall see
The unclouded beauty of their amplest hour.

Peter McArthur

The Stone

A man! A man! There is a man loose in Canada,
A man of heroic mould, a 'throwback' of earlier ages,
Vigorous, public-spirited, not afraid of work!
A doer of deeds, not a dreamer and babbler;
A man, simple, direct, unaffected.
Such a one as Walt Whitman would have gloried in,
And made immortal in rugged man-poetry—
Vast polyphloesboean verses such as erstwhile he bellowed
Through roaring storm winds to the bull-mouthed Atlantic.

And yesterday the man passed among us unnoted!
Did his deed and went his way without boasting,
Leaving his act to steak, himself silent!

And I, beholding the marvel, stood for a space astonished,
Then threw up my hat and chortled,
And whooped in dithyrambic exultation.

Hark to my tale!

On the sixteenth sideroad of the township of Ekfrid,
Just south of the second concession line, some rods from the corner,
There was a stone, a stone in the road, a stumbling-block;
A jagged tooth of granite dropped from the jaw of a glacier
In an earlier age when the summers were colder;
A rock that horses tripped on, wheels bumped on, and sleigh-runners scrunched
on,

And no man in all the land had the gumption to dig it out.
Pathmaster after pathmaster, full of his pride of office,
Rode by with haughty brow, and regarded it not,
Seeing only the weeds in the field of the amateur farmer,
And scrawling minatory letters ordering them cut,
But leaving the stone.

Oft in my hot youth I, riding in a lumber waggon,
By that lurking stone was catapulted skyward,
And picked myself up raging and vowing to dig it out—
But dug it not. I didn't have a spade,
Or, if I had a spade, I had a lame back—always an excuse.
And the stone stayed.

As passed the years—good years, bad years,

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Years that were wet or dry, lean years and fat years,
Roaring election years (mouthing reforms): in short, all years
That oldest inhabitants keep in stock—there grew a tradition
About the stone. Men, it was said, had tried to move it,
But it was a stubborn boulder, deep sunk in the earth,
And could only be moved by dynamite, at vast cost to the council;
But every councillor was a watch dog of the treasury,
And the stone stayed.

Since the memory of man runneth the stone was there.
It had stubbed the toe of the Algonquin brave, and haply
Had tripped the ferocious, marauding Iroquois.
It had jolted the slow, wobbling ox-cart of the pioneer;
Jolted the lumber waggons, democrats, buggies, sulkies;
Jolted the pungs, crotches, stoneboats, bobsleighs, cutters;
Upset loads of bolts, staves, cordwood, loads of logs and hay;
Jolted threshing machines, traction engines, automobiles,
Milk waggons, with cans of whey, envied of querulous swine;
It had shattered the dreams of farmers, figuring on crops;
Of drovers planning sharp deals;
Of peddlers, agents, doctors, preachers;
It had jolted lovers into closer embraces, to their bashful delight;
But mostly it had shaken men into sinful tempers—
A wicked stone, a disturbing stone, a stumbling-block—
A stone in the middle of the road—
Insolent as a bank, obstructive as a merger!

Year after year the road flowed around it,
Now on the right side, now on the left;
But always on dark nights flowing straight over it,
Jolting the belated traveller into a passion black as midnight,
Making his rocking vocabulary slop over
With all the shorter and uglier words.
Boys grew to manhood and men grew to dotage.
And year after year they did statute-labour
By cutting the thistles and golden-rod, milkweeds and burdocks,
But left the stone untouched.

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There is a merry tale that I heard in my childhood,

Standing between my father's knees, before the open fireplace,
Watching the sparks make soldiers on the blazing backlog,
While the shadows danced on the low-beamed ceiling.
A pretty tale, such as children love, and it comes to me now;
Comes with the sharp, crisp smell of wood smoke,
The crackle of flaming cordwood on the dockers,
The dancing shadows and the hand on my tousled head—
A clear memory, a dear memory, and ever the stone
As it lay in my path on the roadway brought back the story—
The loving voice, and, at the close, the laughter.

'Once upon a time there was a king, a mighty ruler,
Deep in the lore of human hearts, wise as a serpent,
Who placed a stone in the road, in the midst of his kingdom,
On the way to his palace, where all men must pass it.
Straightway the people turned aside, turning to right and to left of it.
Statesmen, scholars, courtiers, noblemen, merchants,
Beggars, labourers, farmers, soldiers, generals, men of all classes,
Passed the stone, and none tried to move it—
To clear the path of the travelling multitude.
But one day came a man, a kindly poor man,
Who thought it a shame that the stone should be there,
A stumbling-block to the nation. Bowing his back
He put his shoulder to it, and behold, a marvel!
The stone was but a shell, hollow as a bowl!
A child might have moved it.
And in the hollow was a purse of gold, and with it a writing:
'Let him who hath the public spirit to move the stone
Keep the purse and buy a courtly robe,
And come to the palace to serve the king as prime minister.'
So the kindly poor man who had public spirit
Became the chief ruler of all the nation.
When the news was told to them, all men rushed to the highways
And moved away the stones, but found no purse of gold;
But they cleared the roads of stones, and the 'Good Roads Movement'

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Went through without cost because the king was wise
And well understood our weak human nature.'

Ever when passing the stone I remembered this story

And smiled, touched by memories of childhood,
But knew there was no purse under it; there might be an angle-worm,
But I was not going fishing—and the stone stayed.

Now mark the sequel, the conclusion of the matter!
Yesterday a man went by—whether a neighbour or stranger,
No man can tell me, though I have questioned widely,
Questioned eagerly, longing to do him honour,
To chant his name in song, or cunningly engrave it
In monumental brass, with dædal phantasies—
To make it a landmark, a beacon to all future ages.
This good man, earnest, public-spirited,
Not fearing work, scorning tradition,
Doing his duty as he saw it, not waiting an order,
Dug out the stone and made it a matter of laughter,
For it was no boulder, deep-rooted, needing dynamite,
But just a little stone, about the size of a milk pail.
A child might have moved it, and yet it had bumped us
For three generations because we lacked public spirit.
I blush with shame as I pass the stone now lying
In the roadside ditch where the good man rolled it,
And left it where all men may see it—a symbol, a portent.

Tremble, ye Oppressors! Quake, ye Financial Pirates!
Your day is at hand, for there is a man loose in Canada!
A man to break through your illegal labyrinths,
A Theseus to cope with your corporate Minotaurs,
A Hercules to clean out your Augean stables of grafters,
A man who moves stones from the path of his fellows!
And makes smooth the Way of the Worker!
And such a man may move you! Tremble, I say!

Peter McArthur

The True Evangel

Because that men were deaf, and man to man
I could not speak, but inarticulate
Still felt the burden and the urge of fate,
The strong compulsion of the perfect plan,
From shrine to shrine with eager steps I ran
Harkening to every tumult of debate
Until my weary soul was desolate.
Then turned I to the fields where life began;
And lo! the evangel of the seed has taught
That not through man to God can any rise;
Alone and trusting he must lift his eyes
Until the light of living truth be caught,
And then will deeds with love and patience fraught
Through God to man reveal life's high emprise.

Peter McArthur

To Bernhardt

Of all that felt thy spell I envied one,
A youth whose sightless eyes were dimly turned
Where Tosca's soul with breathless passion burned,
Or thrilled with fury, agonized, undone.

He shrank, as dazzled by the gorgeous sun,
When from melodious words her love he learned,
And purest faith such rapture never earned
As his swift spirit from the darkness won.

But when the torture of a lover's wrongs
Roused all the fierceness of her fruitless rage,
He wrung his helpless hands with many a moan.
Ah, queen of passion! not to cheering throngs
You played that hour, but on a visioned stage,
Past mortal art, to one blind youth alone.

Peter McArthur

To D. A. Mackellar

My cherished dead, when last your placid brow
I saw through tears and ne'er on earth again,
With trembling lips I made a holy vow
To show our love in a remembered strain,
In self-defeated discord of the streets
Where life had called us when our hearts were
strong,
Where friend a friend so true but seldom greets,
I heard a voice of unrecorded song.
With such poor means as are by nature mine
And faith that raised me from despairing gloom,
Today I come as to a sacred shrine
And lay this tribute on your lowly tomb,
And plead, if any question or admire
The living do but what the dead inspire.

Peter McArthur

To Mr Fashionable Fiancee

I sometimes think it would be sweet
If we were like the olden lovers—
The simple-hearted ones we meet
In musty books with vellum covers.

For lovers in those times were blest,
Or else our poets all are lying,
And if fate crossed them in their quest
They had most charming ways of dying.

But you are not a shepherdess
With woolen frock and linen wimple,
And if you were I'd love you less,
I couldn't kiss a swarthy dimple.

And I am not a woodsman wight,
Nor yet a leather-jerkined yeoman,
And I am glad I'm not a knight
With many a boiler-plated foeman.

Yet though for lovers of those days
I have poetic predilections,
To wooing in their artless ways
I own there are a few objections.

A crown of flowers your head might grace,
But it would spoil your frizzled tresses,
And burrs would hardly look in place
Upon your tailor-fashioned dresses.

And I'd not care to gather haws
And sit in thorny shades to chew them,
And who would pipe on oaten straws
When he might suck mint-juleps through them!

In sooth, we're better as we are:
Your gravest task to baffle freckles,
And mine to keep all care afar
And work for the elusive shekels.

Peter McArthur

To The Birds

HOW dare you sing such cheerful notes?
You show a woful lack of taste;
How dare you pour from happy throats
Such merry songs with raptured haste,
While all our poets wail and weep,
And readers sob themselves to sleep?

'Tis clear to me, you've never read
The turgid tomes that Ibsen writes,
Or mourned with Tolstoi virtue dead,
Nor over Howells pored o' nights;

For you are glad with all your power;
For shame! Go study Schopenhauer.

You never sing save when you feel
The ecstasy of thoughtless joy;
All silent through the boughs you steal
When storms or fears or pains annoy;
With bards 'tis quite a different thing,
The more they ache the more they sing.

All happiness they sadly shirk,
And from all pleasure hold aloof,
And are so tearful when they work
They write on paper waterproof,
And on each page express a yearn
To fill a cinerary urn.

Go, little birds, it gives me pain
To hear your happy melodies!
My plaudits you can never gain
With old and worn-out tunes like these;
More up-to-date your songs must be
Ere you can merit praise from me.

Peter McArthur