

Fighting to Make the Vote Count: Mary Gilmore's poetry and journalism

In this talk, I'm going to concentrate on Gilmore's life and writing during the 1890s and the early decades of the 20th century (not on her later roles as champion of the still all-too-contemporary causes of Aboriginal rights and conservation of the environment).

Let me start by pointing out that Mary Gilmore (or Mary Cameron, which was her birth name) was not in Australia when suffrage was finally granted at least at federal level in 1901.

She did have some early connections with the suffrage movement that make it very likely that she was a supporter. Her aunt: Jane ('Jeannie') Lockett (her mother's sister), with whom she spent some time, was an active campaigner, and through her mother, who worked for *The Dawn*, Mary was well-acquainted with that journal and with Louisa Lawson (who may or may not have intervened in Mary's relationship—whatever it was—with Henry Lawson).

Mary Cameron also appears to have spent time listening to Rose Scott—but more of that later.

Her major interest in the 1890s was not in votes for women but in labour (small l) politics and the union movement, and—after the disastrous end of the 1891 shearers' strike – in the New Australia Party and its journal the *New Australia* (founded 1892). Explain New Australia Movement and Mary Gilmore's period in Paraguay (where, under Association's principles women had equal say in the communal decision-making so that woman's suffrage might well have seemed a less compelling interest than the colony's survival)

The only reference to involvement in the movement for women's suffrage in Mary Gilmore's poetry appears to be a curious one: an apparent disclaimer of political activism for women in a poem called *I Gang Nae Mair T' Lecture Hall*.

I should explain that Mary Cameron was intensely proud of her Scots/Irish lineage and quite often wrote in 'the Scots' in her earlier poetry (She was not as eccentric in this as I first thought – when editing the Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems and trawling steadily through every poetry book I could lay hands on, I discovered that there was a quite intense fashion around the turn of the century for writing in the manner of Bobby Burns)

In this 3-stanza poem she declares that she no longer goes to lectures, or sits at the feet of 'Mistress Scott', and concludes

**I speir nae questions, noo, o' life,
Why that is sae, an' that, an' this!
I bide contentit jist a wife,
Wi' ane dear bairn t' guide an' kiss.**

Mistress Scott is of course Rose Scott. The title I gave is the one used in *Marri'd and Other Verses* (her first collection of poetry in 1910), but the poem was written and

printed originally in 1903 under the title ‘Twa Words’ in the *Worker* and in the Tasmanian journal the *Clipper*, where it had an introductory heading ‘MOTHERHOOD VERSUS BALLOT. “To be able to drop a vote in the ballot-box is all very well; but most women would rather have a baby to drop into the cradle.” *Extract from a Letter.*

In January 1910 – an election year –the *Worker* republished it as ‘Contentit’.

There are several ways of reading this poem – apart from face value! One is that it is simply a genre poem: an exercise in engaging with the current crop of pro and anti-marriage poems prevalent at the time. One sign of its being like this is the use of ‘the Scots’, which was frequently used for genre poems— often comic ones. In a similar way she uses a kind of demotic working class idiom in ‘Marri’d’ the poem which is frequently taken as representing a naïve autobiographical celebration of her marriage to Will Gilmore—except that it was written before the marriage and originally published under the title ‘The Housewife’. Though now fallen out of favour, ‘Marri’d’ was very popular with early anthologists of Australian Poetry. They didn’t seem so keen on her anti-marriage poems such as ‘I wisht I was Unwed Again’ or ‘Jane –Who Is *Not* Doreen’ (it probably took me longer than it would have taken contemporary readers in 1918 to recognise Doreen as the one with whom the Sentimental Bloke discovers domestic bliss.

It is unlikely that the title ‘Contentit’ is meant to be simply satirical of either domesticity of intellectual activity. In fact one of the things that interests me in Gilmore’s work, whether in her poetry or in her journalism, is how this can create tensions and uneasiness about her own role.

There’s no doubt that Mary Gilmore admired Rose Scott and she expressed her admiration of Scott’s capacity to be both mind and body in the elegy she wrote on Scott’s death in 1923. It ends

**Years pass and Time drops all things from his mesh—
All save those names nor he nor change disbars,
Where bloomed in all the fullness of their powers
The loveliness of women not all flesh.**

My inclination is to read the 1903 poem as a sign of the psychological struggle that Mary Gilmore was experiencing between her innate nature as a stirrer, her passion to write, and her adherence to the New Australia policy that motherhood (with its necessary complement of domesticity) was woman’s crowning glory and should satisfy all her ambitions. In 1903 Mary and Will, along with their small son, had just returned to Australia and were beginning their time living with Will’s parents in Casterton. Any projected bliss of domesticity seems to have evaporated fairly rapidly under the combined strains of poverty, isolation, the efforts of A.G. Stephens, poetry editor of the *Bulletin*, to tempt her back to poetry writing, and her political discontent with what she saw around her of rural poverty – especially its effects on women.

Not much seemed to have changed since she had written ten years earlier in ‘The Women of New Australia’

**The voices of children, stifling,
Rose up to our God this day,
And He bade our men go forward,
To make them an open way;
And women shall turn no longer
And sigh in a childish face,
And wish that their arms were stronger
To fight for a breathing space.**

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But 2 things had changed: women had the vote and the Australian Labor Party was contesting federal Elections.

And these were very much in the forefront of her mind when Mary found a way to reconcile her competing impulses in the writing of a Women's Page for the *Worker*, (although one should add that it also gave her an opportunity in the regular feature of Poet's Corner to publish a substantial amount of her own poetry)

Gilmore believed that voting the Australian Labor Party into government was the best way to improve the conditions of working class life. The mission of her Women's Page in the *Worker* (a.k.a. from 1913 as the *Australian Worker*) was to convince working-class women of this, and to make them recognise the powers and the obligations that went with having a vote. She was going, she explained to Henry Lamond (editor of *Worker*) to be 'a fisher of women'. Her intended audience was not to be intelligent, well-read middle-class women, but those whose interests were primarily in holding a household together, who might not even know that they were starved of knowledge of 'things political and social'. And playing to those domestic interests would be her bait to lure these readers into wider spheres.

This was the strategy she explained to Lamond

The main thing in order to awaken knowledge is to awaken interest. And if cookery recipes, health notes, flannel stitching etc., will unlock the door of interest; by all means let us have them.

From the beginning Mary Gilmore used her Page to urge women to vote. In the run up to the 1910 election, she issued detailed instructions on how to cast a vote, printed the names of Labor candidates, urged readers to memorise them, organised a children's competition with prizes for those who sent the most neatly printed names of Labor Senate candidates.

[Possible addition here about the competitions—contains a reference to Vida Goldstein –will depend on how I'm going for time]

In the issue of 10 March, 1910, she wrote

It is the woman's day, this election; and the returns will show whether the women believe in good Labor laws; or are poor, silly things, led away by false statements, afternoon teas, and the dazzle of 'receptions' and ready to sell the birthright of husband, father and son, even as they have sold themselves and their daughters for this kind of social recognition'

After the 1917 election she wrote in the 19 September issue

Women worked everywhere for women in the election. And women all over Australia will rejoice that the Party that set Motherhood, National Defence, and Financial security (in the Commonwealth Bank) in the first place has been returned to power.

Some commentators, such as Sharyn Peace in her very informative essay on the Woman's Page ('Fishing for Women') see Mary Gilmore as 'always unashamedly partisan', and indeed Mary Gilmore described herself late in life as having been 'always a Labour woman', but she did want women to be intelligent voters, urging them not to have a 'brain like a potato' (13 October 1910) and in the very first issue of the Page she was prepared to praise the ultra-conservative organization, the Women's National League, for attempting to educate women to direct their interest outwards from the domestic sphere into the areas of social and political policies.

For me, two of the constants that underlie the eclectic nature of the Women's Page are Gilmore's sympathy for the poor and the underdog and her belief in education (remember she was trained as a teacher). If the long-term goal was to eradicate poverty and its injustices through politics, the Women's Page could do its best in the immediate present to alleviate some of its worst effects by education in domestic hygiene and domestic economy.

One outcome of this was the popular bestseller **The Worker Cook Book**

And there is plenty of evidence that her Page did have a wide readership for reasons other than just recipes.

When I began working on the edition of Gilmore's Collected Verse, an early task was to examine all the manuscripts in order to separate out published and unpublished mss and see if the mss of published poems shed light on their genesis and development. In what seemed to me a logical step, I began with Series One of the MS 727, the largest of several different MSS in the NLA. MS 727 Series One actually consisted of poems not identified as published (although some in fact were). They were often untitled, fragmentary and undated, but I soon realised that one could establish a date before which they could not have been written, because they were written on the back of letters she'd received from readers of the Page. Unfortunately for me, they were mostly written in pencil on the back of letters written in ink on rather poor quality paper. Deciphering the poems was difficult –and I kept on getting distracted by the letters, which were a fascinating insight into life in the early 1900s. In the poem 'My Scattered Flock' (in *The Tilted Cart*, 1925). Gilmore writes of the questions that reach her, 'week by week . . . as knowledge plays at hide-and seek' with her readers.

Among the heterogeneous requests for help is one from a swagman that reminds us of the importance that the suffragettes gave to alcohol as a cause of human poverty, homelessness and degradation.

**Writes me, he does, “Dear friend,” says he,
“For God’s sake send me, if you can,
A cure for Booze. It’s got me down.
I’ve nothing left to send . . .,” says he,
And with the gesture of a man
He puts in stamps for half-a-crown.**

While she wonders in this poem why God made men weak, and sometimes attacks men as the source of women’s suffering, MARY GILMORE was not a strenuous combatant in the battle of the sexes (which she tended to explain as the result of either the stresses of poverty or poor social practice).

This is particularly true of her poetry, although I can’t resist calling your attention to this example (excluded, we may note, from *Married and Other Verse* along with most of her early ‘radical’ verse)

PROGRESS

**The rug that the woman had made
To keep her baby warm,
The man took out when hunting
In case of a sudden storm.**

**And the shelter the woman built
To keep her baby dry,
The man found very pleasant
For an after-dinner lie.**

**And the love the woman bore him
Who fathered the baby-life,
Taught her what she taught him after—
The love of a home and wife.**

**And thus sprang man’s progression,
And its wonders many piled:—
From the woman’s rug and shelter,
And love through a little child.**

This was the poem as first printed in the *Cosme Monthly* (1989). Even in its politeness it reflects the rebellious annotation I found on one of the mss in the NLA: ‘It is repeatedly stated that man is progressive and woman retrogressive, but, perhaps, it is otherwise’. And a very different final stanza appears in the version printed under the title WOMAN – AND MAN in *The Worker* in 1912. It runs:

**But as for man!—say what he can—
He stole her rug, he stole her hut,
He stole her virtue even:
And if he could, no doubt he would
(Unless, indeed, the gate were shut!)**

Steal e'en her place in Heaven.

Certainly Gilmore found plenty to campaign about concerning poverty as in general an injustice to women in the Women's Page. One aspect of this –still all-too relevant is her attitude to birth control—which in those days largely meant abortion or infanticide, either directly or indirectly.

Given her inclination to glorify motherhood it's perhaps surprising to find her prepared to even countenance such things in the Women's Page of 15 October 1908:

God forbid that any woman should think it well to resort to evil, or practise any form of infanticide, however indefinite and seemingly remote, yet when a woman sees child after child born to a drunken brute of a father, and in the full knowledge that blows, evil surroundings, and want of food will be the inevitable portion of each child's lot, how can it be wondered if she thinks wrong things right.

Even less dramatic circumstances could attract her sympathy: the mere frequency of pregnancies led all too often to women being 'worn out, bled out' (The Married Women's Death Rate')—although she preferred solutions such as better maternal health services (even a form of childcare) to the advocacy of birth control.

She also knew very well that shame was a powerful factor leading to infanticide and despite apparently irreproachable personal sexual morality she wrote a number of poems sympathetic to the 'Fallen Woman' –and not all driven by the idea that this always came from poverty, for she had a clear recognition of (even admiration for) the driving force of sexual passion):

'Down by the Sea' [If there's room!]

I'd like to end however with one of the poems in which poverty is the driving force that denies women their right to fulfilled motherhood

JUDGED

"She didn't seem a bit sorry that the baby was dead, in fact, she seemed rather glad."—Extract from a Letter.

**It pined, and pined, and cried,
And I had not the time
To tend it, either night
Or day, and so it died.**

**But once, before it went,
It looked at me, and smiled,
A little, fleeting smile,
So pitiful, so spent.**

I could have cried aloud;

**But who would care? Who help?
Who grieve because of one
Small soul lost in the crowd?**

**And, late, as night wore through,
It gasped, and sighed.—And I—
I know that I was glad
When it passed out. . . . O, you**

**Who guiltless hold yourselves,
Give ear! When women work
All day, and half the night,
And starve, and sell themselves**

**For bread; they do not weep
Because the children die,
They only weep because
The children live.**

In this kind of a world, there was work to be done: and Mary Gilmore knew that then—as indeed now—casting a vote was one way of trying to make things happen.