

## Leon Gellert poems

Leon Maxwell Gellert was born in 1892 and educated in Adelaide, Australia. His Grandparents were Hungarian immigrants. Leon was regularly beaten by his Father James, so at the age of 17 he began a course of self-defence lessons, which were to prove useful when, one day his father attacked him with a heavy piece of timber, James Gellert was thrown on his back. Leon, after leaving school worked for a time as a pupil-teacher until he enlisted as a private in 10th AIF. On October 22 1914, Gellert and the 10th Battalion set off for Egypt. Corporal Gellert became drunk for the first time in his life, on Melbourne Bitter whilst sailing on the Indian Ocean.



Gellert resumed writing poetry after arriving in Cairo; his output grew once the 10th set off for the Dardanelles. For seven weeks, his battalion was kept in reserve on their troop ship before being ordered to land at Ari Burnu beach at dawn on April 25. Wounded by shrapnel, and suffering from septicaemia and dysentery, he was evacuated to Malta in July and thence to London. This is where most of his poems were written, including 'The Last to Leave'.

After collapsing into a coma that doctors suspected was epileptic, Gellert was discharged as medically unfit on June 30, 1916. Amazingly, he re-enlisted in November, only to be discharged four days later when his medical record was uncovered.

After the death of his wife Kathleen in 1969 in Sydney he moved back to Adelaide where he died on 22nd August 1977.

### The Last To Leave

The guns were silent, and the silent hills  
had bowed their grasses to a gentle breeze  
I gazed upon the vales and on the rills,  
And whispered, "What of these?" and "What of these?"  
These long forgotten dead with sunken graves,  
Some crossless, with unwritten memories  
Their only mourners are the moaning waves,  
Their only minstrels are the singing trees  
And thus I mused and sorrowed wistfully

I watched the place where they had scaled the height,  
The height whereon they bled so bitterly  
Throughout each day and through each blistered night  
I sat there long, and listened - all things listened too  
I heard the epics of a thousand trees,

A thousand waves I heard; and then I knew  
The waves were very old, the trees were wise:  
The dead would be remembered evermore-  
The valiant dead that gazed upon the skies,  
And slept in great battalions by the shore.

### **Anzac Cove**

There's a lonely stretch of hillocks:  
There's a beach asleep and drear:  
There's a battered broken fort beside the sea.  
There are sunken trampled graves:  
And a little rotting pier:  
And winding paths that wind unceasingly.  
There's a torn and silent valley:  
There's a tiny rivulet  
With some blood upon the stones beside its mouth.  
There are lines of buried bones:  
There's an unpaid waiting debt :  
There's a sound of gentle sobbing in the South.

### **Before Action**

We always had to do our work at night.  
I wondered why we had to be so sly.  
I wondered why we couldn't have our fight  
Under the open sky.

I wondered why I always felt so cold.  
I wondered why the orders seemed so slow,  
So slow to come, so whisperingly told,  
So whisperingly low.

I wondered if my packing-straps were tight,  
And wondered why I wondered.....Sound  
went wild.....  
and order came..... I ran into the night,  
wondering why I smiled.

### **The Attack at Dawn**

'At every cost,' they said, 'it must be done.'  
They told us in the early afternoon.  
We sit and wait the coming of the sun  
We sit in groups, — grey groups that watch the moon.  
We stretch our legs and murmur half in sleep  
And touch the tips of bayonets and yarn.  
Our hands are cold. They strangely grope and creep,  
Tugging at ends of straps. We wait the dawn!  
Some men come stumbling past in single file.  
And scrape the trench's side and scatter sand.  
They trip and curse and go. Perhaps we smile.

We wait the dawn! ... The dawn is close at hand!  
A gentle rustling runs along the line.  
'At every cost,' they said, 'it must be done.'  
A hundred eyes are staring for the sign.  
It's coming! Look! ... Our God's own laughing sun!

## **Lemnos Harbour**

The island sleeps,-but it has no delight  
For em, to whom that sleep has been unkind.  
My thoughts are long of what seems long ago,  
And long, too, are my dreams. I do not know  
These trailing glories of the star-strewn night  
Or the slow sough of the wind.

I hear the rattle of the moving car;  
The children crying in the lighted street,  
I walk along the same old asphalt way.  
I see the church,-I hear the organ play.  
I see the hills I wandered on afar,  
And spots of rain at my feet.

I see the dust-strewn hedge,-the latched gate;  
The gravelled path with roses either side;  
The cedar tree,-my mother's window pane.  
I see the place where I sat long and late  
By the trellis deep and wide.

The red Virginia crumbles at the wall.  
The bed is bare where winter's snow-drops grew.  
I feel my dog come licking at my hand.  
I pause awhile beside the door, I stand.  
And hear the well-known footsteps softly fall  
And the voices that I knew.

I slowly creep and peep beneath the blind.  
-My father reads his book within his chair.  
Some children play their game of dominoes.  
My mother sits beside the fire and sews;  
Her head is bowed. I know her eyes are kind  
By the grey lines in her hair.

I tap the pane to see those tears unshed.  
I see all turn, and watch them sadly stirred  
By the sound, and peer to see my face without.  
They see, and smile, I hear no welcome shout.  
They sit and gaze as they that see the dead,  
But no one says a word.

The island sleeps. May sleep come soon to me,  
And lull these dreams within my shaken mind;

-These dreams that tell me I have seen the last  
of those I left so,-loved so in the past.

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I hear the murmur of the moving sea,  
And the murmur of the wind.

## **Rendezvous**

Long before the dawn breaks  
With a bird's cry,  
I'll be hustling on the wind  
Out where you lie -  
Hurrying to our rendezvous  
Under the April sky.  
I'll step from out the sea again  
To the shoulder of the land,  
And pass the dead boy where he lies  
Prone on the tideless strand,  
Treading lightly lest I move  
His fingers in the sand.  
Do you remember how you stopped  
After the sudden climb,  
Sniffing the air as one who comes  
On a holy thing sublime?  
I'll meet you where the breeze brought  
The first sent of thyme.  
I'll meet you where we yearned that morn.  
Under the April sky,  
Waiting on our bellies there  
For the battle cry.  
I'll meet you where I left you there  
Lying all awry.  
You said, "We will continue the  
Discussion by and by."  
.....  
If I could but remember what  
We spoke of, you and I!

## **The Jester in the Trench**

"That just reminds me of a yarn," he said;  
And look for the body of Lofty Lane  
He had a thousand yarns inside his head.  
They waited for him, ready with their mirth  
And creeping smiles, - then suddenly turned pale,  
Grew still, and gazed upon the earth.  
They heard no tale. No further word was said.  
And with his untold fun,  
Half leaning on his gun,  
They left him - dead.

## **A Night Attack**

Be still. The bleeding night is in suspense  
Of watchful agony and coloured thought,  
And every beating vein and trembling sense,  
Long-tired with time, is pitched and overwrought.  
And for the eye,  
The darkness holds strange forms.  
Soft movements in the leaves, and wicked glows  
That wait and peer. The whole black landscape  
swarms  
With shapes of white and grey that no one knows;  
And for the ear, a sound, a pause, a breath.  
The hand has touched the slimy face of death.  
The mind is raking at the ragged past.  
.....A sound of rifles rattles from the south,  
and startled orders move from mouth to mouth.

## **The Three Concerned**

The Man

He lies forgotten 'neath the watching skies,  
the blood upon his bayonet scarlet bright;  
the red moon shining in his glazed eyes,  
the 'Last Post' crying, crying in the night.

The Woman

She proudly sits within her home of gloom,  
and reads and reads his lines with wistful smile,  
then, eyes aglisten, seeks the empty room  
(and he within his bloody grave the while.)

The Child

His wooden war-horse stands beside his bed,  
his tiny pillow holds a head of gold.  
He dreams of all the things his father said,  
he dreams of all the tales his father told.

## **The Cross**

'I wear a cross of bronze,' he said,  
'and men have told me I was brave.'  
He turned his head,  
And pointing to a grave,  
'they told me that my work of war was done.'  
His fierce mouth set.  
'and yet, and yet.....'  
he trembled where he stood,  
'and yet, and yet'.....  
I have not won  
That broken cross of wood.