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THE WAYFARER

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GORDON COMMEMORATIVE COMMITTEE INC.

THE POET OF AUSTRALIA 1833-1870
WHO LAID THE FOUNDATIONS FOR LITERATURE AND THE ARTS
IN AUSTRALIA



Image by Allan Childs

Adam Lindsay Gordon's rightful place in the canon of Australian Literature:

Why has it not been maintained?

Helen W. Dehn

I was awarded a Master's degree for a thesis on Adam Lindsay Gordon back in 1999. Having developed an abiding interest in Gordon, I subsequently produced a booklet about him which came to the notice of the Adam Lindsay Gordon Commemorative Committee. Having since joined this committee, my interest in Gordon was given fresh impetus.

In recently revisiting research material I still hold, I was struck by the paucity of recognition given to this poet by modern literary critics in Australia. In fact such neglect seems to have been deliberately practised by Australian educators as well as critics more or less since the thirties and I believe it began in our schools, specifically in the School Readers wherein Gordon's poetry was rarely included, and in Book 6, where it was included, the end notes held him up as an example of deficient moral fibre rather than as a poet.

Adam Lindsay Gordon is the only Australian poet for whom Australians have erected monuments in cities and country towns, in hotels and at race tracks, and whose very boots are preserved as relics. In fact more has been written about Gordon than about any Australian poet before his time or since, yet for the most part there has been little serious discussion about his career as a poet or the development of his work, with most biographers and commentators focusing on biographical details, and his undoubted skill on a horse. Indeed, some modern writers such as Judith Wright have all but dismissed Gordon's work as simplistic and not even Australian.



Photo by Charles Rudd State Library
Victoria Catalogue H39357/245

The shadow that blighted Gordon's image as a role model for school children of the thirties was of course, Gordon's suicide. He shot himself on the morning of 24 June 1870 after a solitary walk from his home in Brighton to the beach. Much was made of his impoverished circumstances, his many persistent riding injuries, his temperament, his upbringing, the death of three of his four sisters and his exile as a youth to Australia. He has also been said to be a Stoic with a death wish, a coward and a wastrel. But whatever he may have been, it should not put his work outside the bounds of serious consideration or detract from his place in the canon of Australian literature.

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My aim as a member of the Commemorative Committee is to revisit Gordon's work in an attempt to restore his reputation as Australia's most significant poet. According to Dr. Richard Jordan, who was my supervisor during the writing of my thesis at the University of Ballarat, "if the true history of Australian poetry is ever to be written, the immense significance of Gordon will once again have to be recognised." ¹

So I had to ask myself, what WAS significant about Gordon's poetry? After thinking about this for a while I concluded it was the spirit with which it was (is) imbued. In the first phase of Gordon's work it was an HEROIC spirit and in the second, which was the more distinctly Australian phase, his poetry while still pervaded by bravado, had taken on a more stoic acceptance of failure. It was rhythmic, bold and colourful even as losses and suffering, including the death of his baby daughter, gave it depth and anchored it in a fatalism that had previously had only literary origins.



A.L. Gordon on Outlaw.
Creator Harry Stockdale.
Source nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an9653868

A literary analyst writing in 1892 summed up the problem apparently viewed as such by educators. In his view Gordon's "poetic descriptions, great as was their intrinsic merit, derived their principal interest from the feeling which always mingled with them. He (Gordon) was himself the beginning, the middle, and the end of all his own poetry – the hero of every tale, the chief object in every landscape". ² "But with all our admiration of Gordon, it is impossible not to fear the effect of much of his poetry, and not to deprecate the introspection likely to prove to many its principal charm. There is a danger of accepting with his brilliant lines and lovely descriptions that hopeless cynicism which marred a life that should have been glorious". ³

A lone voice disputing such danger was that of literary reviewer, Patchett Martin, who believed that Gordon's troubles sprang from his cultivation of the Muses, and that the average emigrant from Britain was not likely to follow his example. ⁴ This is the opinion I believe to have been the most perceptive.

Nonetheless, a man whose spirit was celebrated for well nigh 70 years as Australia's leading literary figure has, for over the past 70 years been consigned to obscurity in the evident belief that suicidal tendencies are contagious – and over latter years that jumps racing should be banned. These are two hurdles that will have to be surmounted before Gordon's work can be reassessed in light of Patchett Martin's comment and, hopefully, resume its rightful place in the canon of Australian literature.

Adam Lindsay Gordon and the Muses

The Muses made their first appearance in Greek mythology out of which evolved Greek philosophy and literature, and the body of what we refer to as the Humanist Greek Judaic Christian tradition. All these strands of human thought were interpreted and re-interpreted through the ages, often in the Greek language, so it's not really surprising that the underpinnings of Greek mythology and philosophy survive to this day. Such underpinnings revolve around the concept of Truth, signified in Greek myth by the chief god Zeus, while the lesser gods signified lesser, but still supremely important concepts to the development of human intelligence, talents, abilities, personalities and ultimately survival. The Muses were not among these gods: rather they were immortal exemplars of dedication to the development and true recording of heroic endeavour and achievement of mortals and immortals, in the arts and exact sciences.

The Muses were comprised of nine sisters: all born of Zeus (Truth) and Memnosyne (Memory - including unconscious memory of creation). Accordingly they were all genuinely creative, and although they united at times in one great song, they each had separate duties assigned to them.

¹Richard Douglas Jordan, 'Adam Lindsay Gordon: The Australian Poet', *Westerly*, (2) (June 1998): 46.

²A.L.Chapman, 'Adam Lindsay Gordon', *Sydney Quarterly Magazine*, (2) (June 1892) : 129.

³Ibid. 130

⁴A. Patchett Martin, 'An Australian Poet', *The Australian Journal* (May 1884) : 519.

“Clio, the Muse of history, recorded all **great deeds** and **heroic actions**, with the names of their authors, and was therefore generally represented with a laurel wreath and a book and a stylus, to indicate her readiness to note all that happened to **mortal men** or **immortal gods**.

Euterpe, the graceful ‘**mistress of song**’, was represented with a flute and garlands of fragrant flowers.

Thalia, Muse of **comedy**, held a shepherds crook and mask, and wore a crown of wild flowers.

Melpomene, who presided over **tragedy**, wore a crown of gold and wielded a dagger and sceptre.

Terpsichore, the light footed Muse of the **dance**, was represented in the act of dancing.

Erato, the Muse of **lyric poetry**, was pictured with a lyre.

Polhymnia, **Muse of rhetoric**, held a sceptre to show that eloquence rules with resistless sway.

Calliope, Muse of **epic poetry**, also wore a laurel crown.

Urania, Muse of **astronomy**, held mathematical instruments, indicative of her love of the exact sciences.

This glorious sisterhood was wont to assemble on Mount Parnassus or on Mount Helicon, to hold their learned debates on poetry, science and music”.⁵ Their much loved leader was Apollo, god of music, whose handling of the heavenly sun chariot signified guidance.



The Muses have inspired western poets throughout the ages, first among them being Homer, who has been said to have been “the greatest of all epic poets”⁶ and to have left the earliest pictures of European civilization both as poetry and history, in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. “These works constituted the ‘Bible’ of the Greeks in historical times”⁷ and epic poetry as we know it, might never have been cultivated by later poets if the Homeric poems had been lost.⁸ Later poets included Virgil, Lucan, Dante, Milton, Pope, Swinburne - and Adam Lindsay Gordon.

According to the Introduction to *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*, the sources of Gordon’s poetry were Byron, Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne⁹ but while Gordon may have borrowed from any or all of these poets, it is contended here that his primary inspiration came directly from the works of Homer. Homer was blind hence his inspiration seems to have been a mixture of history and the legendary roles and activities of the Greek gods. It is also thought by this author that they were fuelled by love of his fellow Greeks, their foibles, their courage and the glorious legacy they left, which Homer related through his cultivation of the Muses.

The four chief qualities of the Homeric style have been said to be **rapidity; directness of thought; plainness of diction; and nobleness**,¹⁰ also features of Gordon’s poetry, which are exemplified in the following stanza from Podas Okus in the voice of the dying Achilles:

⁵H.A. Guerber, *The Myths of Greece and Rome*, (London, George G. Harrap, 2nd ed. 1938), 56-7.

⁶John Drinkwater (ed.) *The Outline of Literature*, (London: George Newnes, 1923). 20.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 21.

⁹*Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes: Poetical Works of Adam Lindsay Gordon*, (Sydney: Seal Books, 1995).lxxxii.

¹⁰Drinkwater op. cit., 36.

Dry those violet orbs that glisten,
 Darling, I have had my day;
 Place your hand in mine and listen,
 'Ere the strong soul cleaves its way
 Through the death mist hovering o'er me,
 As the stout ship cleaves the wave,
 To my fathers gone before me,
 To the gods who love the brave!

It is worth noting here that Gordon's sight, like that of Homer, was impaired. He was very short sighted which may explain the impressionist quality of his poetry: the rapid brush strokes remarked on by Brian Elliot: "Gordon's strokes were broad ... he scrutinised nothing closely, yet the effect was vivid".¹¹ But perhaps because 19th century Australians associated 'proper' poetry with the more lyrical subtleties of English poets such as Shelley, hence Gordon's initial publications barely sold a copy.

The use of simile is also characteristic of Homeric poems: "they are not mere decoration ... they are dramatic: that is, they arise out of the action".¹² Adam Lindsay Gordon also employed simile, as in *Hippodromania*, *The Race*:

On the hill they are crowding together,
 In the stand they are crushing for room,
 Like midge –flies they swarm on the heather,
 They gather like bees on the broom;
 They flutter like moths round a candle –
 Stale similes, granted, what then?
 I've got a stale subject to handle,
 And a very stale stump of a pen.

Gordon's use of simile was not as original or as frequent as Homer's but like Homer, Gordon used natural forces to add dramatic colour, even to his more introspective poems, but what I want to focus on is the change of idiom that characterised his transition to more 'Australian' poems.

Adam Lindsay Gordon in Transition

In the opinion of Henry Gyles Turner and Alexander Sutherland writing in 1898, until a national spirit is developed, Australia must be content with the production of a local literature, "essentially English in its characteristics, but moulded by climatic and scenic surroundings into form that gives it sufficient distinctiveness to justify the term Australian".¹³

Using this criterion, it can be truly said that Adam Lindsay Gordon became an Australian poet, although some of his works retained classical roots. Early works such as *Podas Okus* were rooted in Greek mythology while *The Feud* was rooted in English mythology – both heroic in character – as was *The Roll of the Kettledrum*, but the idiom became more personal in *Wormwood* and *Nightshade*, which was published on 16 March 1863 in the *Border Watch*.

¹¹Brian Elliot, *The Landscape of Australian Poetry*, (Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney: Cheshire, 1967) 76-9.

¹²*Ibid.*, 39.

¹³Henry Gyles Turner and Alexander Sutherland, *The Development of Australian Literature* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1898), 26.

You are no false ideal,
 Something is left of you,
 Present, perceptible, real,
 Palpable, tangible, true;
 One shred of your broken necklace,
 One tress of your pale gold hair,
 And a heart so utterly reckless,
 That the worst it would gladly dare.

It is thought that the Annie referred to, was a pet name for his sister who is the subject of the poem, and Gordon's childhood playmate. It can be seen that the motif still running through many of his works was that of death and in some, a sense of regret that the writer wasn't among the heroes he wrote about. Indeed, in *Roll of the Kettledrum*, he projects these heroic sentiments onto the warrior's horse:

We, too, sprung from loins of Ishmaelite stallions,
 We glory in daring that dies or prevails;
 From 'counter of squadrons, and crash of battalions,
 To rending of blackthorns, and rattle of rails.

I think it's in these verses that the image of the classic hero is most apparent, and it prevailed over many of Lindsay's real life actions. His pre-occupation with death probably sprung from the early deaths of his three sisters and the daring may have arisen from a consequent loss of faith in the society of which he was part, to explain these tragedies. The stoicism he adopted seems to have crumbled upon the death of his own baby daughter, and after his move to Brighton his main concern was probably to provide for his wife. He failed in that endeavour and that may have been the point at which he reverted to the (noble) notion of self-sacrifice for a greater good – i.e. the preservation of his wife's future.

Reverting to his poetry: there have been many assessments of Gordon's poetry made on many different grounds: among them Francis Adams' assessment that that Gordon "reached to the reality of things".¹⁴ Adams went on to say "he escaped the prison of the effete and [the] conventional social instincts of his time ... [that his verse possessed] a sort of fiery insistence ... and a decisive tone."¹⁵ Gordon was also said by another analyst to exhibit a "Homeric swiftness of narration"¹⁶ and more than one analyst mentioned this rapidity as in "Gordon entrances us with vivid graphic sketches that throw minor details altogether upon one side. His effects, like those of Titian amongst painters, are wrought in the mass. He is impatient of minutiae and seeks to impress by the vigour, the boldness, and withal the swiftness with which he executes his outlines".¹⁷

While Smeaton compared the effects of Gordon's word pictures to those of Titian's paintings, this author would be more inclined to place Gordon among the post-impressionists: with Toulouse Lautrec's rapidly executed and lively posters, or Van Gogh's swirling colours. The only colonial painter I can think of whose works were similarly rapidly executed and full of movement is S. T. Gill, and although the Heidelberg School produced some excellent post impressionists, their work, for the most part, did not convey the rapid and rhythmic movement so typical of Gordon's poetry.

¹⁴Francis Adams, 'Australian Criticism and the Reaction against Gordon', *Centennial Magazine: An Australian Monthly*, 2 December 1890. 550.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶W. H. O. Smeaton, 'A Quartet of Australian Singers', *Centennial Magazine: An Australian Monthly*, 1 July 1888, 857.

¹⁷Ibid.

Gordon's metrical compositions varied a little, but horse poems such as *How We Beat the Favourite* and *From the Wreck*, were anapaestic, which is to say his lines consisted of a foot (i.e. a beat) of two short syllables followed by one long one, as exemplified in this descriptive verse penned by Mary Holtby.

It's the **pace** of a **race**; it's the **grace** of the **chase**,
It's the **beat** of the **feet**, of a **horse** on the **course**;



Adam Lindsay Gordon racing at Dowling Forest race track, Ballarat (1869)
Artist: T.H. Lyttleton State Library Victoria Catalogue H6697

The long syllables appear in bold type, and the reader will see that they are preceded by two short syllables, and that the combination creates a recognizable rhythm.

Different analysts have nominated different poems as examples of Gordon's poetic talent and some of those choices are agreed to by this writer, but ultimately the quality that in my view, set Gordon apart from his contemporaries in Australia was the depth of his desire to know the meaning of life, combined with the sensitive expression of his different moods: introspection, chivalry and boldness.

According to Adams, "a poet's contribution to literature is simply the ideas on life, on man and on nature, which he is possessed of, and the greater or lesser degree of technical skill with which he expresses them"¹⁸ On this criterion, Gordon's work could be thought to have surpassed the work of his Australian contemporaries and laid the groundwork for future balladeers without reaching the standards set by Homer or some of the more lyrical poets.

Adam Lindsay Gordon – Australia's National Poet.

A turning point in Gordon's transition from cultural observer to cultural interpreter is observable in his poem *The Dedication*. It begins by pointing to anomalies in Australia's flora and fauna, the harshness of its climate, the passion and drama of its creation and its seeming lack of recognizable features, but then he describes persistent sounds that penetrate the gloom – glad chirrups and the wash of waves. The dawn reveals a world of white lustre while the spring season gives birth to trembling wattle gold 'twixt shadow and shine – and the blue sky's distance evokes a song in the heart – a song that in his view, had he heard earlier, might have elevated his poetic endeavours.



It matters little in the long run – or so he says – he's now in this land and has become attached to its colours, moods, silences and sounds – and most of all perhaps to the laconic heart of the bushman. Gordon's transition, if viewed through his poetry, wasn't a sudden change of idiom; rather it was a dappled change of attitude and the introduction of Australian trees, wide spaces, sparse settlements, blue and gold, hot summers, horse races, seashores and moments of regret. It doesn't seem to have been a wanted transition but it took place nevertheless as he found himself among expatriates like himself who were also struggling to make new lives.

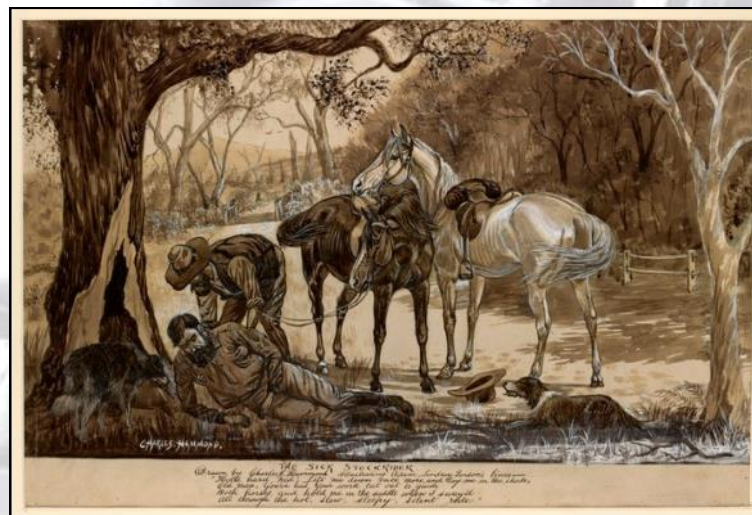
¹⁸Adams, op. cit., 550.

Bushmen had yet to be sanitised or eulogised by such as Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson, but Gordon made a start in this direction with his horse poems, the most popular of which was *The Sick Stockrider* – as Australian a poem as had then been written. Still nostalgic though, and dealing with death – but not heroic death – rather a kinder and more peaceful passing with visions of future generations living their lives in turn.

T'was merry in the glowing morn, among the gleaming grass,
 To wander as we've wandered many a mile,
 And blow the cool tobacco cloud, and watch the white wreaths pass,
 Sitting loosely in the saddle all the while.
 T'was merry 'mid the blackwoods, when we spied the station roofs,
 To wheel the wild scrub cattle at the yard,
 With a running fire of stockwhips and a fiery run of hoofs;
 Oh! the hardest day was never then too hard...

I've had my share of pastime, and I've done my share of toil,
 And life is short—the longest life a span;
 I care not now to tarry for the corn or for the oil,
 Or for the wine that maketh glad the heart of man.
 For good undone and gifts misspent and resolutions vain,
 'Tis somewhat late to trouble. This I know –
 I should live the same life over, if I had to live again;
 And the chances are I go where most men go....

Let me slumber in the hollow where the wattle blossoms wave,
 With never stone or rail to fence my bed;
 Should the sturdy station children pull the bush flowers on my grave,
 I may chance to hear them romping overhead.



The Sick Stockrider (1915?) Artist: Charlie Hammond. State Library Victoria Catalogue H83.8/1

Stockrider wasn't the last poem Gordon wrote, but it conveyed what was becoming an Australian idiom to a responsive audience of 1st and 2nd generation Australians more aptly and more kindly than any other poem Gordon wrote.

There were other 'Australian' poems of almost equal popularity such as *How We Beat the Favourite* and *From the Wreck* – the latter a favourite of mine – but Gordon could sometimes revert to classical images, even in his Australian poems, such as *The Old Station*, when describing the daughter of the house:

Shone, gold - besprinkled by the sun,
Her wanton wealth of back blown hair.
Soft silver ripples danced and spun
All round her ankles bright and bare.
My speech she barely understood,
And her reply was brief and rude;
Yet God, they say, made all things good
That He at first made fair.

She bore a pitcher in her hand
Along the shallow, slender streak
Of shingle-coated shelving sand
That splits two channels of the creek;
She plunged it where the current whirls,
Then poised it on her sunny curls,
Waste water decked with sudden pearls
Her glancing arm and glowing cheek;
What more is left to speak?



Image courtesy of Dover Publications

Even so, the image is a simple rather than a dramatic one, and the maiden isn't swooning or bereft. In other words, it's not a dramatic image. It's as if Gordon himself has mellowed and was no longer striving to know the meaning of life – or death – and that mellowness, which was tantamount to recognition of his fallibility, and the fallibility of those around him, is what, in my view, made Gordon an Australian, rather than an English poet.

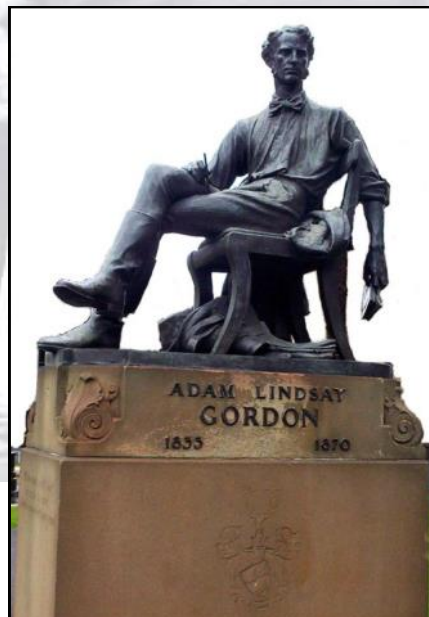


Image courtesy of rangerjohn.com