

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (February 2000)

By Rob Upson

WILLIAM GAY - A Bendigo Poet

The Governor-General, Sir William Deane, in his recent Australia Day message, made reference to and quoted a verse from a 19th century Bendigo poet named William Gay.

Not much appears to have been written about this man, but a brief summary of his life and work can be found in a small volume entitled *The Poetical Works of William Gay*, published in 1911.

He was born in 1865 in the village of Bridge of Weir, Renfrewshire, Scotland and brought up in a strict Calvinistic family. He went to Glasgow University and studied Latin, but this was not to his liking. Espousing religious doubts led him into conflict with his father who wanted his son to be a minister of the church.

He escaped an unpleasant family atmosphere by going to London and living in lodgings in Bloomsbury, an area associated with writers, artists and philosophers. Eventually, after living an almost penniless existence, he returned to Glasgow in ill health. He was diagnosed as having consumption and a journey to a more conducive climate was recommended.

He boarded the ship *Dunedin* going to New Zealand and arrived at the town of the same name in 1885. After working for a while on coastal and excursion ships he was back in hospital with a recurrence of the disease. He had heard about Victoria from friends and went to Melbourne where he was offered a position as a master at Scotch College. However, by 1891 he was back in hospital and in 1893 came to Bendigo, first living at Kangaroo Flat and then Mundy Street.

It was here and in failing health that he wrote and published most of his poems and other literary works. His treatise on Federation called *The Commonwealth and the Empire* was not a best seller, but his *Christ on Olympus and other Poems*, which he himself published in 1896, was more successful.

He finally succumbed to his illness and died on 22nd December 1897, aged 32 years. The Annals of Bendigo for that year said of William Gay.....*His poetical works especially won the admiration of competent critics both in Australia and England. There is something strangely pathetic about the life of this delicate young Scotsman, obliged to leave his home and kindred for Australasia in search of health.....Bendigo was the home for several years of this young man whose talent, wasting disease could not repress.....From the bed which held his frail form he sent forth a series of sonnets and poems, the purity and beauty of which have been attested by most of the best judges of*

literature in Australasia.....

Footnote :- I don't believe there is any family connection between William Gay and the English poet and dramatist, John Gay (1685-1732). The latter wrote the libretto for *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728. Two hundred years later a modernised version of this musical work was written by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht called *The Threepenny Opera*, with *Mack the Knife* being its most recognisable tune. Thought you might like this little bit of trivia as a conclusion.