William H. Ogilvie (1869–1963): From Outback to Border Poet

By Ian W. Landles

Celebrated down under as a balladeer of the bush for his evocative poetry of the Australian Outback, the poet William Henry Ogilvie (1869–1963) never achieved the same national status in his home country. On his return from Australia he took inspiration from the history, culture and landscape of his home in the Borders. Ian W. Landles, Chairman of the Will H. Ogilvie Trust, provides an overview of his life and work.

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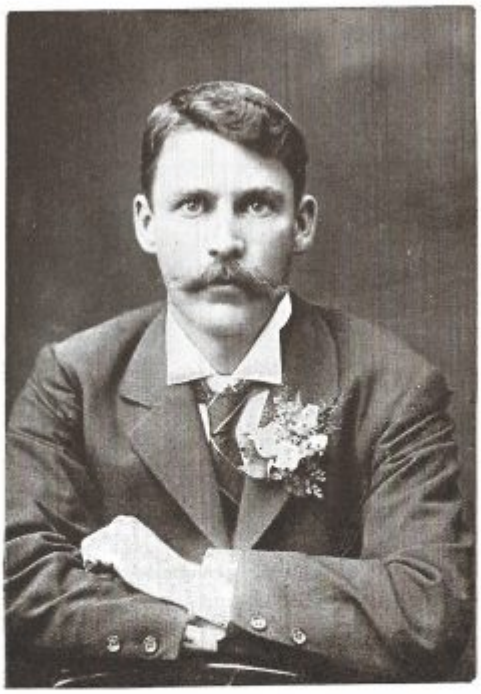

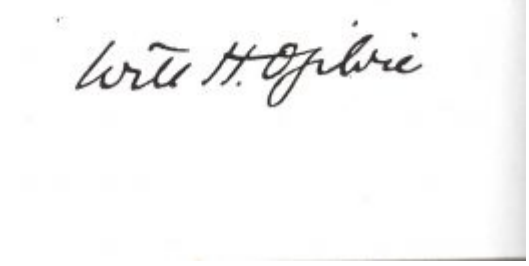

Born at the farm of Holefield near Kelso on 21 August 1869, Will H. Ogilvie was

the second child and eldest son in a family of eight, his father a tenant of the Duke of Buccleuch for whom his grandfather was Chamberlain. The farm required a group of Clydesdale horses to work the land and their presence in his childhood likely inspired Will's love of horses, from which much of his poetry sprung in later life: he became known as the horseman poet of the Australian balladeers as well as a first-class equestrian. 'The Hoofs of the Horses' from his *Collected Sporting Verse* (1932) captures both the cantering rhythm and Will's own appreciation of the animals he deemed 'swifter than Fortune and sweeter than Love':

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Educated at home by a governess and then tutored by a clergyman at Malton in Yorkshire, Will went on to spend a term as a day boarder at what is now the Abbey Row Centre before attending Fettes College in Edinburgh, where he played rugby for the first fifteen and won the school prize for Latin verse. At nineteen years old, Will was sent to Australia to work with friends of the family, the Scotts of Belalie, who owned a large sheep station where he became a station-hand, drover and horse breaker. The vast area of land that the station covered is described in his autobiographical prose work *My Life in the Open* (1908):

> *The writer has helped to muster thirty thousand shorn wethers and to drive them ten miles to the drafting yards. The dust set swirling by so many thousand sheep can be better imagined than described and the great flock moved slowly forward through a heavy yellow twilight with a fifteen-mile fence on one side and the horsemen and sixteen good sheepdogs on the other. When the last of the mob went leaping through the gateway of the paddock the leaders were being steadied up to the second gate four miles away.*[1]

Will served his literary apprenticeship down under and there achieved national status as a bush balladist of the same stature as his Australian contemporaries: Henry Lawson, Adam Lindsay Gordon and Andrew 'Banjo' Paterson (the latter the composer of Australia's unofficial national anthem – and celebrated bush ballad – 'Waltzing Matilda'). Will was, and indeed still is, very highly regarded in Australia,

and his poems from this era describe the hard life of the drover, the overlander and the swagman. ‘His Epitaph’ from *Fair Girls and Gray Horses* (1898) tells of a simple grave on an old bush racecourse with its rough-hewn legend ‘He alwas rod to win’:

And when in life’s keen struggle, we shall fight for inside place,
When they crowd us at the corner and we drop from out the race,
When the ringing hoofs go forward and the cheering greets the best,
And the prize is for the winner and the red spurs for the rest,
May we find some true-heart comrade, when they’ve filled the last clods in
Who will carve those words above us – ‘He alwas rod to win’.

Despite the success Will achieved in Australia, the pull of his northern homeland remained strong. Writing from over nine thousand miles way, ‘Bowmont Water’ from *Fair Girls and Gray Horses* captures ‘an exile’s’ longing in its re-imagining of the stream that rises in the Cheviot Hills:

O we think we’re happy roving,
But the stars that crown the night,
They are only ours for loving
When the moon is lost to sight.
And my hopes are fleeting forward
With the ships that sail the sea,
And my eyes are to the nor’ward
As an exile’s well may be
And my heart a shrine has sought her
Where the lights and shadows play,
At the foot of Bowmont Water,
Bowmont Water far away.

Returning to Scotland in 1901, Will led a bohemian existence in Edinburgh before taking on the post of Chair of Agricultural Journalism at the State College of Iowa for two years. In 1908, he married Madge Anderson from Ettrickshaws and settled down once more in the Borders, firstly at Bowden and then at Kirklea, the old Free Kirk manse at Ashkirk, to earn his living by his pen. In all, he published twenty books of poems.

As he settled back into Scottish life, Will replace the bush ballads with poems and songs celebrating the landscape, history and culture of the Borders, becoming one of its best ambassadors in verse. One local turbulent era to which he turns often is that of the Border reivers, who were most prominent during the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. As the historian Alistair Moffat explains,

> *Over an enormous area of Britain, perhaps a twelfth of the landmass of the island, there existed a people who lived beyond the laws of England and Scotland, who ignored the persistent efforts of central government to impose order, who took their social form and norms from the ancient conventions on tribalism, who invented ever more sophisticated variants on theft, cattle rustling, murder and extortion – and gave them names, like 'blackmail'. And they spoke and sang beautiful, sad poetry and told a string of stirring, unforgettable songs.*[2]

This era is crucial to any understanding of the history and culture of the Border area yet its tales of cattle rustling and the roaming of sweeping land must have also held for Will a reminder of the Outback he had left behind. So, too, must he have felt an affinity with the reivers and their open-air life underpinned by rousing poetry. His epic riding ballad 'Whaup o' the Rede' pulls together these different strands to portray the effect that this most vital epoch had on the development of the Border character and history:

> *Red on the darkness the streamers run*
> *Of a flame that is not of the rising sun,*
> *And the shriek that echoes from hill to vale*
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> *Ere the last pale star had died in the west*
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Who had scorned to live where their leader died.
The ruthless raider reined his steed
On the crown of the march: behind him the Rede
Wound glittering down through the autumn flowers
And was lost in the smoke of the smouldering towers.

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In an introduction to 'Whaup O' the Rede', Will explains his 'simple and rugged attempt' to 'deal with the strenuous times of our forebears' while further capturing his commitment to his homeland:

> *If [the poem] brings anything of the freshness of those glorious hills among which its scenes are laid, anything of the spirit of those stirring days in which our forefathers fought and rode, anything of the lights and shadows that roll unceasingly across the slopes of Cheviot and down the Ettrick valley, it has not been written in vain.*[3]

The rivers and hills of the Borderland appear with human energy in Will's poetry, his tender personification of the surrounding landscapes capturing 'the fullness of a heart that loves every leaf and grass blade on the Borders'.[4] He writes of the 'sunlight shoulder' of the Teviot, 'Silver sounds her cymbal call', and a 'snowstorm drifting down the Bowmont vale' which 'made Cheviot white': 'left him glistening in his silver mail / The day's last champion in the lists with the night'. The beloved horses of his childhood and working life in the Outback haunt

his depictions of the Borders, best highlighted in his song ‘Ettrick’, which was set to music by the composer Graham Peel in 1925:

> *Wild ettrick, wild ettrick*
> *Your blue water gleams,*
> *An azure cloaked lover*
> *That rides through my dreams.*
> *The heath’s at your stirrup,*
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In such verses, Will’s celebration of his home soil is most evident, emphasised by Hugh MacDiarmid who, writing in 1957, praised Will as ‘the Grand Old Man of Border Song’ and termed him a ‘worthy successor of the balladists of the past […] who have made the Borderland a “nest of singing birds” for centuries’.[5]

William H. Ogilvie’s memorial cairn
(photo credit: Ian W. Landles)

Will loved playing with words and contributed many short light-hearted poems to various periodicals. His work often graced the columns of *Punch* and, during the interwar period, he had numerous poems printed in the *Edinburgh Evening News* under the nom-de-plume ‘O’. In one whimsical verse, ‘A Warning to Cooks’, Will reflects on the Scottish palette and his revulsion of certain foods, describing ‘haggis and rabbit’ as ‘not my habit’ and porridge as ‘just a mess’. Despite the vigour of his verse, Will was a shy, reserved man who shunned publicity – a gentle person with an air of old-world courtesy.

In a poem written for his ninetieth birthday, Will's daughter Wendy captured her father, by this point increasingly frail and failing, in a tender reflection of his former life in Australia:

The old man sits in the firelight dreaming.
Patient and quiet and grey,
And behind the flames he sees pictures gleaming
From half of the world away.

Under the knotted crook of his fingers
He feels the run of the reins;
Back in the bushland whose memory lingers
He's riding the sunlit plains.

My father, the late William Landles (1912–1998), evoked both the bush and the Border reivers history of Will's verse in his poem 'Salute' for the celebrations, calling on 'The beat of the brumbies' hooves' and 'the rallying shout of the clans'. A few years later, he led a (sadly unsuccessful) campaign to honour Will for his services to literature, approaching the Secretary of State for Scotland as well as Harold MacMillan. He often looked back at this era and said that the OBEs went, instead, to The Beatles. As a prolific Border poet in his own right, my father recognised the value of Will's work not just to the Borders but to Scotland as a whole and strove to commemorate it: he was a founding member of the Will H. Ogilvie Memorial Committee and passed down his appreciation of Will's poetry to me.

William H. Ogilvie died on 30 January 1963. A poetic tribute written by Isabella Johnstone was published in various national newspapers, its opening verses a poignant depiction of the Border landscapes, which are pictured responding to the death of one of their great defenders:

The Border hills are weeping,
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The burns have ceased their leaping,
Silent now they go.

The hill winds sob their sorrow,
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By Teviot, Ettrick, Yarrow,
The snows have spun a wreath.

Ogilvie's memorial cairn (photo credit: Derek Oliver)

Will was honoured with a memorial tablet placed in the family enclosure in Ashkirk Kirkyard. His ashes were scattered beside his beloved Hill Road to Roberton, a place where 'grey hills and blue hills […] melt away and meet / With cotton-flowers that wave to us […] And over all the Border mist – the Border mist over all'. Here, on 21 August 1993, the memorial was erected and unveiled following a series of fundraising events in the early 1990s. It was a marvellously evocative memorial: a cairn surmounted by an open book in bronze – a worthy and long overdue tribute to a great man – made by the celebrated Scottish sculptor William (Bill) Landles, my father's cousin. Sadly, the memorial was destroyed when the priceless bronze was stolen in August 2016. Thanks to the wonder of modern technology – albeit at huge expense – Beltane Studios were able to create a replica from a laser copy of the identical cairn in Australia. It was unveiled on a new site at the head of Harden Glen on 17 August 2019, the highlight of the poet's 150th anniversary commemoration.

Though he didn't receive the plaudits he deserved from his own countrymen in his

lifetime, the legacy of Will H. Ogilvie lives on and will do for as long as his poetry wings its way down the generations to all those who hold in their hearts a love like his for the Borderland. It is to Will my mind turns when hearing the words from Sir Walter Scott's 'Lay of the Last Minstrel': 'The last of all the bards was he / Who sang of Border chivalry'.*Celebrated down under as a balladeer of the bush for his evocative poetry of the Australian Outback, the poet William Henry Ogilvie (1869–1963) never achieved the same national status in his home country. On his return from Australia he took inspiration from the history, culture and landscape of his home in the Borders. Ian W. Landles, Chairman of the Will H. Ogilvie Trust, provides an overview of his life and work.*

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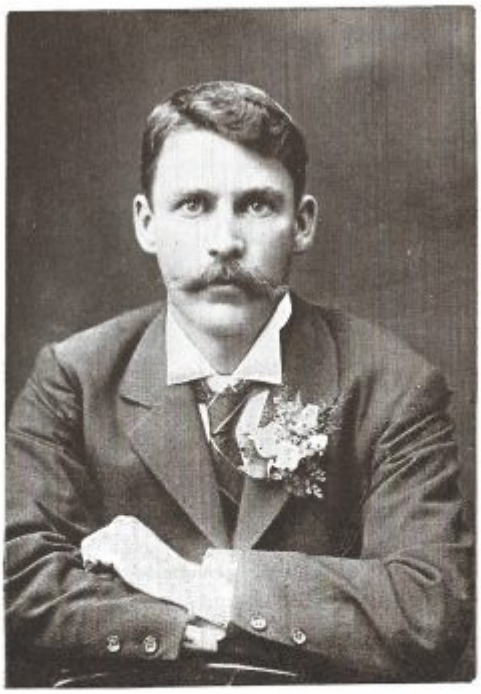

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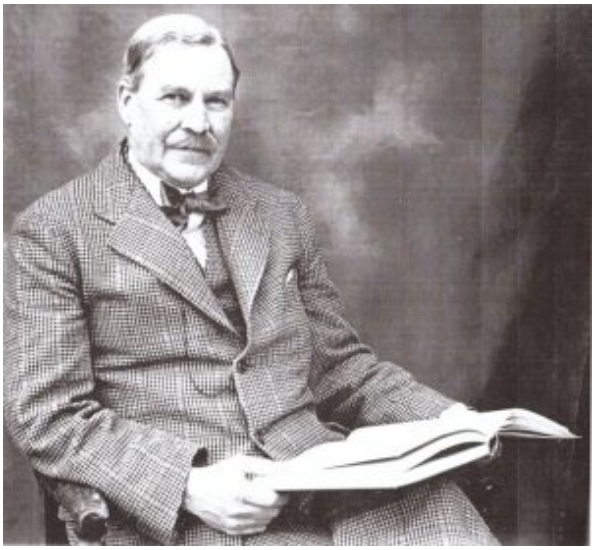

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