

Wha-a-a-a-t? ... I'm bolt upright in my grave! Screaming for release. Let me at 'em!

Nothing gets past me, dead or not! I heard! ... My best poem! Without a by your leave, you've allowed it to fall into the *wrong-est* hands – and sullied it! Tainted it for ever. My best poem.

You can take my picture right off the \$10 bill, because I'm on patriotic strike! You hear, you silly burghers of Canberra? I'm up and haunting you! Go on. Rename that suburb and the state highway. Call them anything else but Gilmour! Take down those portraits of me in the galleries. Rescind my state funeral. ... How could you? I'm - appalled.

I've been appalled all my life, really. Appalled when I was a young teacher sent to the outback to educate those who knew better than I what the world was about: what poverty did to you. Sixteen I was and barely schooled myself when they sent me to Broken Hill and Wagga Wagga. Pretty appalled when city newspapers refused to publish my accounts because I was a girl. 'I am girl socialist,' I screamed, 'does that help?' ... Not in passive right-wing Australia, it didn't.

So I carried on calling out: hollering for greater government support for the poor. Bellowing for better working conditions for women, and children's welfare and equality for indigenous Australians. All Australians! We needed to provide for *them*. And we weren't. Simple as that. Vast numbers of immigrants we needed like a hole in the head when we couldn't feed our own.

Ooh, they all said, you're too angry: 'too radical for us here at the The Australian Workers' Union, suggest you try the Communist Party'. All right I said, I bloody will: haha! I wrote for the *Tribune* newspaper for decades!

Look, I tried conformity – for a while. Married, had a child – but just to keep all those parochial tongues wagging, I ran off with Henry Lawson, the country's most famous poet – (he taught me a thing or two - moving swiftly on) – took off to Patagonia – (oh,

long story, another day) – came back and tried to settle to being an obliging farmer’s wife – but it was no good. The city’d got me by the throat by then so I - deserted - and high-tailed it back to Sydney.

And what a thrilling life I led there! Not chastened one bit! I churned out the articles, tore institutions and policies to verbal shreds, and found myself lauded – hah, at last - for my ‘reliable outspokenness’. Dubbed the ‘Dreaded Doyenne’ of the Sydney literary world, always getting my ugly mug on television or my cackly voice on radio! And while I was on the crest of this popularity wave, I took to poetry. Well, they were *scrabbling* over themselves to publish me! Ha!

And as a prize for my bad behaviour, a damehood. Only slightly contrary to my social views! ‘Services to literature.’ Services to decades of table-thumping and head-banging, more like. I deserved it. I accepted willingly on behalf of my equally hard-working Scottish family: the Camerons, carvers-out of the prosperous Riverina district. They’d have thought it was fair reward. And true to family form, I slogged on till I couldn’t any longer: last published at 84, pegged out exhausted at 97.

But I still can’t rest, no ...

... this poem I’m livid about. I wrote it as a wartime morale-booster. Because I love this country and all its people: the indigenous folk, and all the pioneers who helped shape an unbiddable wilderness into a Shangri La. I love it! One of the verses goes:

*We are the sons of Australia,  
Of the men who fashioned the land;  
We are the sons of the women  
Who walked with them hand in hand;  
And we swear by the dead who bore us,  
By the heroes who blazed the trail,  
No foe shall gather our harvest,  
Or sit on our stockyard rail.*

*No foe!* And now? It turns to ash in my mouth. After a lifetime of well-controlled fury, now I'm really rope-able!

You see, my great-great nephew's name is Scott Morrison, present Australian prime minister – yes, that's bad enough, but listen: - a year or so ago, on a state visit to Washington, there was your *de rigueur* fancy banquet, you know – when a certain putrid and APPALLING so-called p-president - took a copy of *my* poem into his pudgy hands and read it. Out. Aloud. As a tribute, a welcome, he said. He read it - publicly. He took verse that I had lovingly written and which could only be meaningful to us Australians and he put it into his mouth: 'No foe shall ... sit on *our* stockyard rail.' ... Ours! Get it? You poppy-cocking opportunist. Ours!

And I'm expected, just because I'm dead, to take that lying down? No fear!

**Dame Mary Gilmour**

**Angie Cairns**

The things you find out about yourself once you're dead. I didn't just turn in my grave; I sat bolt upright in it and banged my head. Screaming for release. I just can't take this lying down.

My best poem! You've taken it right out of context – and abused it, maligned it. You were given no right! And they've stuck my ugly mug on the £10 bill and now I demand they take it off. You hear, you worshipful burghers in Canberra? Take down those paintings of me in the National Portrait Gallery and the Art Gallery of NSW. Rename that Canberra suburb and the state highway. Strip me of my damehood. Regret ever giving me a state funeral. Go on. Because I'm - ashamed.

I should have stuck to journalism. Reportage and analysis – can't be so easily misinterpreted. Yes, that's what I want to be remembered for: where I became known as a campaigner for the disadvantaged, for the indigenous, for people's rights: in *The Australian Worker* and *The Bulletin* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. After all I had seen in those remote bush schools as a young teacher - 16 I was and barely educated myself - up out of Broken Hill and Wagga Wagga and Illabo – I saw true poverty and you couldn't see what I saw and not become a socialist.

You see, I believed in self-determination but I also believed in a helping hand: government support. I believed in the White Australia Policy - though that's been held against me too and misunderstood - there was little enough post-War work for us as it was without taking in vast numbers of immigrants from Asia. We didn't need the commandeering of our land and our towns and our jobs when as it was they couldn't provide for the Australian people.

Yes, I championed the interests of the workers and the oppressed. I campaigned constantly for better working conditions for working women, for children's welfare and for a better deal for the indigenous Australians – whom I loved and honoured. Oh, I was too much for most people: even my own employers; I kept being – subtly, strategically - moved on: too radical for the AWU, more suited to the Communist Party, as it turned out: I wrote for their newspaper *Tribune*, although I was never a party member myself. And I was not so radical that I didn't happily accept a DBE for my services to literature! Me, wee Mary Cameron from the Riverina!

And I did the other conventional things: married, had a child, had an affair – they say – with Australia's most famous poet Henry Lawson – moving swiftly on – and finally after a spell in Patagonia – oh, another story, don't ask – took up farming in northern Victoria – which didn't suit the NSW girl in me at all. Eventually I got so restless we had to part, my husband and I, and I high-tailed it back to Sydney.

But I couldn't shut up, kept on writing, took up the poetic pen, became the doyenne of the Sydney literary world, frequently asked to become the oracle on all matters political and social on radio and television, a national mouthpiece and icon! As if trying to cheat on this damned old death, I wrote prodigiously right into my 80s; my last book of verse was published in 1954 when I was 89! Didn't peg out finally till I was – 97 - and still barking!

