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**A Bush Poet’s tribute**

Probably no political figure has been so robustly and eloquently defended in modern literature as Parnell. Irish writers of the calibre of Yeats and Joyce, both for different reasons, wrote politically committed tributes to Parnell but this was some time after the events, after a period of intense heroisation of Parnell into a hero and martyr of the Irish ‘Home Rule’ cause during the 1890s. It is all the more remarkable that a minor Australian poet (most famous for the ballad, ‘Where the Dead Men Lie’) defended the ‘uncrowned king of Ireland’ in the period before his death.

Boake’s poem about Parnell, until recently unpublished, exists in manuscript form in the State Library of Victoria. Boake’s career was brief. He died by his own hand at the age of 26 in 1892. The poem was written after the O’Shea divorce proceedings in late 1890 but before Parnell’s untimely death (6 October 1891). Elizabeth Malcolm suggests it may have been written in response to the violence engendered by the by-elections of 1890-1.

It is an unusual poem in Boake’s corpus. He, like Furphy, was a writer, from the Protestant-dominated newspaper accounts of Parnell to the columns of appreciation and criticism of the mainstream (Protestant-dominated) newspaper press delighting in the disarray and factionalism within the party, and cracking juvenile jokes about making a new flag from the mistress’ underwear:

> A new banner, constructed out of the petticoat of Mrs. O’Shea; the green flag of Ireland, with its sunburst and harp, was to be set aside, and replaced by the sign of a fire-escape. (22 January 1891)

After his death, the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 14 November 1891, pontificated gleefully:

> Death, often dramatic in its effects, has excelled itself this week. On Monday afternoon ... came news that Mr. Parnell had died... Parnell, obstructionist to the last, dies in the evening of the very day that Mr. Smith breathed his last, and in the newspaper press the columns of appreciation and criticism of the stormy career of the Irish chief justise into comparative obscurity the decent lamentation over the bier.

The *Maitland Mercury* of 13 October 1891 delivered a number of backhanded compliments and came out as censoriously as the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland against his personal morality, and mobilised racial stereotypes:

> he was the captain of a race proverbial for impulsiveness, for want of disciplined temper, for wildness and unreason in speech and action. Of course he possessed certain commanding qualities. He was courageous; he was determined, indeed inflexibly obstinate; if he was no orator, he was a speaker who used no superfluous word and who made every sentence tell... What more he might have done cannot be even conjectured. For one series of shameful acts came to light of that secret private life which he led.

The *Melbourne Argus*, of 21 November 1891, reprinted trivialising material from the * Pall Mall Budget*, the major organ for the moral purity campaigners: they alleged Parnell was cold, exceedingly nervous, a loner, a hopelessocrat, superstitious, and the gossip columnist provided voyeuristic detail of fluctuations in his weight in his final illness.

Despite his achievements in Westminster, Parnell appears to have had few friends in Australia willing to defend him publicly or in print in the troubled period after his loss of support in committee room 15. The Catholic Irish *Advocate* (Melbourne) hedged its bets a little, drawing a discreet veil over the latter part of his career, but was largely supportive of his achievements (10 and 17 Oct. 1891), and the *Bulletin* used the occasion of his death to praise him as a leader greater than Daniel O’Connell, but also to make fun of moral purity campaigners and especially the Catholic Church. It is perhaps noteworthy that in titling at both of these groups, the unnamed *Bulletin* writer uses imagery similar to that in Boake’s poem, and Irish-inspired imagery:

> [Parnell] had committed the unpardonable sin of offending a religious body which, preaching forgiveness, never forgives the man who breaks its canons, and he had outraged the dense stupidity of the British mind. The GULLIVER of Irish unity was held powerless by the meshes of the net woven by a myriad Lilliputian malignities. (17 October 1891, p.7)

Boake’s poem might have found a home in the *Bulletin*, which had already published many of his poems, but for whatever reason, Boake did not offer it for publication.

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**An Irish Leader**

Deposed insulted yet uncowed he stands
Knitting pale brows and clenching nervous hands
The uncrowned King who gave a nation laws
Views his life wasted in a thankless cause.
Before a jealous party’s blatant din
He boldly comes to answer for his sin.
Friendship grows pale, opposing factions prate,
While virtuous patriots leave him to his fate.
Backed by a wavering few he meets the fray’s
While in his presence none dare disobey.
Like cars that, yelping at the lion’s heel
And grown incautious, mighty vengeance feel;
So from afar these pigmies hurl their darts
With spite & hatred in their treacherous hearts.

> ‘No more you lead us, traitor!’ is their cry.
> ‘Traitor in what?’ so comes his stern reply,
> ‘Not to that man so dead to our shame Basely conniving to befoul his name;
> Not to my country; nor to you, foul brood
> Of; sheriffs, swelling thus your gratitude.
> Why should you be the first to cast a stone,
> Have you no sins, no crimes you dare not own?
> Why for one fault should I pay such a price
> While titled England wallows in her vice?
> Why should fair play, Britain’s boast and pride,
> To me alone of all men be denied?
> I still shall battle though the world may jeer
> When Ireland calls Parnell must answer here’

Thus was the fiery challenge boldly cast
Before the world with courage unsurpassed
And Ireland’s Tribune stood before them all
A leader mighty even in his fall.

*Barcroft Boake (1866-92)*

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*Frances Devlin-Glass*