

ARTHUR PETERS – THE BARD OF CRESWICK

Mr A.B. Paterson
c/- Messrs Angus & Robertson
89 Castlereagh Street
Sydney
New South Wales

Mr Arthur Peters
51 Albert Street
Creswick
Victoria

4 April 1903

Dear Mr Paterson,

I make bold to send you the present missive as an ardent admirer of the verse in which you celebrate the virtues and adventures of the horsemen of the Australian bush.

I am the Deputy Town Clerk of the Borough and Shire of Creswick in central Victoria and aspire to the laurels of a poet.

I beg respectfully to request that you cast your eyes over the attached verses and advise me how I could best revise them with a view to approaching Angus & Robertson.

Regrettably much bush verse (though not that coming from your measured pen) celebrates the twin evils of fermented liquor and disloyalty to the lawful representatives of the Crown. I intend that my modest essays in poetry celebrate not such lapses in right conduct but an Australia in which bushmen joyfully and diligently perform their daily toil then repose in the company of their loyal spouses and sturdy children and, in “the cups that cheer but not inebriate”, toast the British institutions and laws under which they thrive. In addition to my original poems, I have revised old bush songs to remove the objectionable elements of rum and rebellion and so combine vivid sensation with irreproachable conduct.

I have founded a fife and drum band for local boys who practise together each week; I also lead them on regular walks in the bush. This is to afford the boys healthy musical and outdoor activities to prevent them from falling into idleness, the school of all vice. I also conduct at the Mechanics’ Institute evening classes in grammar, arithmetic and penmanship for the young men who intend to sit the clerkship examinations for the public service and the railways.

I divide my remaining hours of leisure between acting as the Hon. Sec. of the Creswick branch of the Total Abstinence League and playing the mandolin in the amateur musical and theatrical group which performs in Creswick’s Lyceum Theatre.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur Peters

Mr Arthur Peters
51 Albert Street
Creswick
Victoria

A.B. Paterson
West Hall
Queen Street
Woollahra
New South Wales

10 April 1903

Dear Mr Peters,

I must thank you for your interesting letter and the verses you enclosed. While reading the latter, I sometimes had the strange feeling that I had written the lines myself, for example in:

“And my heart is ever crying that I’d like to swap with Ryan,
And ride with the overlanders cracking stockwhips overhead,
While he spend his days distracted as he added and subtracted –
I don’t think he’d like the ledgers, Ryan, of the Watershed.”

My advice to all beginning poets is to clear their own track and avoid writing poems that sound at all like those that they have read or that cover similar topics. The busy life of a country town and the admirable work that you do for its youth provide the subjects that you know best and so will be able to handle best. These subjects await their poet in Australia.

I also suggest that you concentrate your energies on your own work and not on revising old bush songs; any refined version is likely to lose the vigour and life that mark the original. This occurred to me when I read your rewriting of “The Overlander”:

“So pass the billy round, boys,
Milk, sugar and the strainer
And tonight we’ll drink the health
Of every true abstainer.”

Only a genius like Burns could improve old songs. The rest of us have to admit that the popular muse knows her own business best.

I wish you well with your poetry and all your other activities.

Yours truly,

A.B. Paterson

Mr A.B. Paterson
West Hall
Queen Street
Woollahra
New South Wales

Arthur Peters
51 Albert Street
Creswick
Victoria

24 April 1903

Dear Mr Paterson,

I write to thank you for your kindness in counselling a brother bard.

In line with your advice, I am composing poems on recent and historic events in the goldmining district of Creswick – endeavouring to refine the ore of everyday experience into the pure gold of poesy. These together with the earlier works will form a collection provisionally entitled “Mandolin Peters – The Crack of the Stockwhip and the Whirr of the Windlass”.

My work has already had some small local success. On hearing that I write, one of the less diligent young men in the office surprisingly asked me to recite some of my poems and bush songs. After I did so, he asked me to give him a copy of particular works so that he could learn them by heart. True appreciation indeed for a poet! I trust that this exercise will have a steadying influence on his character.

I will put pen to paper again when my collection is ready for the publisher. The work of writing and refining my verses will, unfortunately, require me to do less work with the boys and young men but we know that lyric poetry is a jealous muse.

This letter of thanks has been delayed by my recent engagement to Miss Florence Hughes who conducts a private school for Creswick’s young ladies. Miss Hughes is the pianist in our theatrical group and one of the lady tambourinists in Creswick’s Salvation Army band.

Yours truly,

Arthur Peters

Mr A.B. Paterson
West Hall
Queen Street
Woollahra
New South Wales

Miss Florence Hughes
13 Raglan Street
Creswick
Victoria

24 April 1903

Dear Mr Paterson,

I am the fiancée of your Creswick correspondent, Arthur Peters, and write to ask that you discourage him firmly from writing poems or rewording songs.

Arthur has proudly shown me his letters to you and your reply. He is unaware that the young man in his office who showed such interest in Arthur's writing is a member of a young men's drinking club, "The Dirty Ducks", which meets in the back bar of Creswick's White Swan Hotel. In that bar this young man, made up to look like Arthur with clothing and a false moustache, recites to his equally intoxicated companions Arthur's poems and songs in praise of temperance. My cousin, a barman at the Hotel, has also told me that some members of the audience are starting to join in the performance of some of these works.

Arthur is a worthy man and sensible when not talking about poetry. He is inclined to be conceited about his writing and, so, silly. I fear that the habit of ridiculing Arthur's writing may spread beyond the Dirty Ducks and so adversely affect Arthur's reputation in the town. All this may affect his chance of being promoted to the Town Clerk position when Mr Lockett retires in July. It is also not good for a man seeking a senior administrative position to have written complaining of the boredom of the office.

Arthur has a strong sense of duty and is a good influence on the boys and young men. They appreciate his work for them and like him. (The fife and drum band was a great success when it had its first outing at the Empire Day bonfire. The boys liked parading in their uniforms.) This also may change if he becomes a figure of fun in the town.

Please do not mention this letter to Arthur. I thank you in advance for your kindness in assisting with this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Florence Hughes

Mr Arthur Peters
51 Albert Street
Creswick
Victoria

A.B. Paterson
West Hall
Queen Street
Woollahra
New South Wales

3 May 1903

Dear Mr Peters,

Thank you for your letter informing me of our progress with both poetry and in helping the boys and young men of your town.

I noted with concern your advice that, if you are to complete and prepare your collection for publication, you will have to devote less time to your voluntary work. The latter work appears to be so important for the future of your town and its citizens that I feel that I must ask you to concentrate all your energies to this end.

When a correspondent at the Boer War, I noted that the dash, intelligence and independence of mind of the Australian and New Zealand regiments were the qualities responsible for their success in that War. These qualities are those most at risk if boys and young men do not have the healthy discipline of regular application (through study or musical practice), of healthy exercise, of having to mix in well with others and of being able to find their way in the bush. These, the true skills of the Australian bushman, are what you teach through your admirable work.

Given what must be the heavy demands of your senior position in administering the Borough and Shire, I feel that it would be most useful for your fellow townfolk if you devoted all the time that you can spare from your office work and from being an attentive fiancé to developing the youth of Creswick to allow them to take their true place in the life of the new Commonwealth. Your work will also provide a model for adoption in other towns.

You may wish to return to the all too time consuming work of poetry in your years of retirement when you will be able to look back with pride on your contribution to the town and celebrate in verse the progress that you have helped to achieve.

Please accept my admiration for your exemplary voluntary work and my best wishes for you and the future Mrs Peters.

Yours truly,

A.B. Paterson

Mr A.B. Paterson
West Hall
Queen Street
Woollahra
New South Wales

Arthur Peters
51 Albert Street
Creswick
Victoria

12 May 1903

Dear Mr Paterson,

I wish to thank you for your letter and for your moving appreciation of my humble voluntary work.

I cannot refuse to comply with any request from Australia's leading poet. I will do as you suggest, reluctantly doff my poet's robes and devote myself to the higher duty of working for the rising generation.

Miss Hughes has also asked me to thank you for your kind wishes to us.

Yours truly,

Arthur Peters