

**ADAM LINDSAY GORDON (1833-1870) – A GREAT SCOTTISH-
AUSTRALIAN POET?**

Frank Davidson

These days, no-one has much to say about Adam Lindsay Gordon one hailed as the National Poet¹. His best known poem, “The Sick Stockrider”, often anthologised, is acknowledged as a precursor of the bush ballad which Banjo Paterson made his own, but apart from that, what do we know of him?

His most quotable lines have been written in each others’ autograph books by generations of schoolboys, but what is generally memorable about anything else he wrote? Not much, probably, except the four Kipling-esque lines so popular until both autograph books and the British Empire went out of fashion:

Life is mostly froth and bubble
Two things stand like stone:
KINDNESS in another’s trouble,
COURAGE in your own.

In a way, those simple lines really sum up the life of a man once considered to be the national poet of Australia, whose bust stands in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey², the sole Australian poet ever accorded that honour. So we ask ourselves: Was he a great poet? Was he, indeed, an Australian poet, as we understand that description today? And we can even ask, was he really a Scottish-Australian poet?

A Scottish-Australian poet should be able to be identified as both a Scot and an Australian. Adopting the popular contemporary practice of awarding points before authorising a driver’s licence or a bank account, I shall award Gordon points through a range of criteria and see how well he qualifies.

¹ For a brief biography consult the *Dictionary of Australian Biography*; Jane Gleeson-White, *Australian Classics: 50 Great Writers and their Celebrated Works* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2007), p.26

² Douglas Sladen, *Adam Lindsay Gordon, the Life and Best Poems of the Poet of Australia*, The Westminster Abbey Memorial Volume (Hutchinson, London, 1934); The bust was unveiled in a ceremony full of pomp on May 11 1934 see <http://www.adamlindsaygordon.org/westminsterabbey.htm>

Was he born in Australia? No. No points – yet. Was he born in Scotland? No again! Did he come to Australia of his own volition? No! Like the train of convicts who preceded him to Australia, his arrival was involuntary. His departure from the U.K. was “arranged” by his father, after he had figured in a series of questionable escapades. In short, like so many others to grace our shores, he was a remittance man, and so we cannot deny him a point here.

Let’s ask another question. Were his main works written and published here? This time the answer is unequivocally Yes – two books of poems reached the public, called *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* (1867) and *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* (1870), both published in Melbourne. It was as what I would call ‘a functioning Australian’ – someone who lived and worked as an Australian – that he wrote the works that govern his place today in the Australian literary canon. And so Gordon qualifies – not for a driving licence, for which, as the magnificent horseman he was, he would have had no use – not for a bank account, although this was something that he would have sorely needed. But because his Australian work struck a chord in the Australian psyche of the time, and because it was his Australian experience that made him the poet that he became here, yes, he is an Australian poet. But Scottish-Australian? That is another question.

To be Scottish-Australian you must first be a Scot, by either birth or descent. On the face of it, Gordon was what you might call culturally English; and, like many Scots today, was often thought of as such; but this is too simple, because his Scottish roots were very long, very strong and very deep. Let us take a look at them.

He was descended from the family that like so many other aristocratic Highland families, originated in the Lowlands. Indeed, Gordon himself once said that he had the blood of the reivers in him. The Gordons first appeared in Renfrewshire in the 12th century, where in due course they supported Robert the Bruce and one of them gained the lands of Strathbogie in Aberdeenshire – previously held by the Earls of Atholl. Thus the house of Gordon, again like so many others, was divided into Highland and Lowland sections. Then in the 14th century, the Highland group divided again.

I rely here on the assertions of John Malcolm Bullock, who in 1903 wrote a piece called “The House of Gordon” for the New Spalding Club, an historical association devoted to the collection of the history of prominent

families, landmarks and institutions in North-Eastern Scotland.³ It is quoted in the landmark 1912 study of Gordon and his work by Edith Humphris and Douglas Sladen⁴ Bullock included in his work on the Gordons, the Balbithan manuscript, which was the 1730 transcript of an earlier Gordon genealogy; and lists of Gordons from the records of services of heirs, 1545-1799, the Aberdeen poll tax, 1696, and various university records.

Concerning the family's history in Aberdeenshire, Bullock, in his rather chatty way, had this to say.

Sir John Gordon's not having married the mother of his two sons, the famous 'Jock' and 'Tam' ... his lands went to his brother, Sir Adam, who in turn was succeeded by a son and by a daughter Elizabeth ... [she] married Alexander Seton, son of her guardian Sir William Seton ... her eldest son took her name and became the ancestor of the Earls, then Marquises of Huntley, and finally the Dukes of Gordon.⁵

What is interesting about this observation is that, according to Bullock, although to trace the progeny of the two brothers that he calls simply 'Jock' and 'Tam' is apparently a genealogist's nightmare, he is certain that Adam Lindsay Gordon was descended from both of them – from Jock and from Tam; and, as well, from the Seton Gordons through Jock and Tam's legitimate first cousin Elizabeth — quite a compaction of Gordon blood.

In fact it appears that Adam Lindsay's ancestors often seem to have married very little outside their own quite immediate Gordon family. His direct ancestor was the fifth son of Tam – he was a George Gordon of Hallhead, in the parish of Cushnie, while the fortunes of the family were established by George of Hallhead's descendant, Adam Lindsay Gordon's great-grandfather Robert Gordon, who left Scotland for France, where he lived for about 30 years and built up a large wine and spirit business partnership. As so many Scotsmen did who had profited abroad, he returned to Scotland and established himself on a baronial estate, thereby becoming

³ John Malcolm Bullock, *The House of Gordon* (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1903).

⁴ Edith Humphries, & Douglas Sladen, *Adam Lindsay Gordon and his Friends in England and Australia* (Constable: London 1912).

⁵ John Malcolm Bulloch, *The House of Gordon* (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1903), p. 370.

Gordon of Esslemont. The estate was immediately entailed for inheritance through the male line. For those of you interested in consanguinity, Adam Lindsay Gordon's mother and his father were both grandchildren of Robert Gordon of Esslemont, and of course of Esslemont's wife Lady Henrietta Gordon; who, in turn, descended from the 2nd Duke of Gordon. A very intricate genealogical web, which may have had something to do with the temperament that Adam Lindsay Gordon inherited.

As one of the commentators on Gordon and his life has remarked:

The marriage of first cousins is not necessarily bad, but if there is any weakness in the common heredity, there is an obvious risk that the marriage of cousins may intensify it. Lindsay's father and mother were both Gordons, and in both (latent in one, active in the other) were the twin strains of wildness and morbidity that marked another and more famous Gordon line, that of 'Mad Jack' Gordon and his grandson, Lord Byron.⁶

So to make Gordon's story a little simpler, here is an outline of his early life. His father, Captain Adam Durnford Gordon, went to the West Indies as an Ensign, then changed to the East India Company service and held a commission in the Bengal cavalry, with which he fought in Burma. After 11 years, although still under the age of 30, he was invalided back to England because of ill-health. The editor of Gordon's collected works, a Melbourne lawyer called Frank Maldon Robb, stated in his 1912 Introduction:

The interesting young invalid fell in love with his cousin, Miss Harriet Elizabeth Gordon, who, in addition to her other attractions, had a fortune of £20,000 settled upon herself, and invested in 3¼ % consols – a piece of financial business which was fraught with unforeseen consequences to her son.⁷

⁶ C. F. MacRae, *Adam Lindsay Gordon*, Twayne's World Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), p.10.

⁷ Frank Maldon Robb, (ed): *The Poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon with introduction and notes* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. xviii.

After the birth of two daughters, Ignez and Ada, Harriet began to show the first signs of a religious mania that eventually dominated her life. She is described as becoming unbalanced, neurotic, bigoted towards the low Anglican outlook, but artistic, charming when in a good temper, the reverse when not. Her father had a plantation on the island of Fayal, in the archipelago of the Azores, a territory of Portugal in the mid-Atlantic between Portugal and North America. The family left England and lived here, in an attempt to restore Harriet's well-being; it was here that Lindsay, as he was called, was born on 19th October 1833. Harriet was not happy in the Azores and the parents returned to England, where Lindsay was one of the original intake of pupils when Cheltenham College opened its doors. This was in 1841, when he was 8 years of age, but he did not stay long at Cheltenham, which had been set up to prepare boys for the job of ruling the British Empire, and his father put him into a private school at nearby Dumbleton Rectory, where he fared better, until he was enrolled in the nearby Royal Worcester Grammar School near Cheltenham.

From here, he was sent at the age of 14⁸ to the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, which existed to prepare officers for the Artillery and the Engineering corps, ostensibly to prepare for an Army career like his father's. Incidentally he attended Woolwich at the same time as a fellow clansman who later became famous as General Gordon of Khartoum. The two men were born in the same year, 1833, and obviously came from the same clan, although apparently nobody had succeeded in tracing a relationship between them. Someone who was at the college in their time noticed that they were the very antithesis of each other - one a grim and conscientious Puritan, the other a sensuous, pleasure-loving poet and sportsman. Statues of both the Gordons, the General and the poet, were raised in Melbourne, where they stand in Spring Street, the austere Gordon of Khartoum facing south, Adam Lindsay, the poet, in his shirtsleeves, facing north.

Let us return to Lindsay's early life. It will probably be no surprise to learn that he left Woolwich with no commission. This lack was variously attributed to defective eyesight, to lack of application to his studies, and to outright misconduct, which probably had the most to do with it although it is true that he was short-sighted.

Tales survive from his schooldays of his prodigious capacity to recite long passages of Virgil and Homer by heart, and of his entertaining his

⁸ This was young. The average entry age was 16 and the course ran for 2 and half years.

dormitory by re-telling in their entirety the stories of Sir Walter Scott. After the fiasco of Woolwich he returned to Cheltenham where, according to a rather bad-tempered statement by W.W. Wilde in the “Australian Writers and Their Work Series” Gordon preferred:

...to spend his time careering on horseback over the Cotswolds, keeping bad company, gambling, attending horse races and prize fights, and in general dissipation.⁹

To these activities at the age of 18 we can add such scurrilous pastimes as amateur theatricals, flirtations, heavy drinking, sketching, and writing verse. It was at this time that he fell in love with Jane Bridges, the daughter of a wealthy local farmer, who under different circumstances he might have married. Nevertheless, his time was mainly spent on the nearby Prestonbury Racecourse, for as we would say today, he was mad about horses, and also at an establishment called the Roebuck Inn. This was not only for socialising and drinking, for the inn also housed a boxing school and it was here that, under the tutelage of Jem Edwards, the middle-weight champion of England, Gordon with his longer than average reach and his indifference to physical pain, honed his skills in the ring in a sport which, although *déclassé* – which of course he considered irrelevant – was another of his passions.

It was in this environment that Gordon went too far and aroused the outrage of his social milieu. On 25th March 1852, he broke into a livery stable where a horse called Lallah Rookh¹⁰ was kept, knocked out the attendant groom and rode the horse off to victory in a local steeplechase called the Berkeley Hunt Cup. This escapade was too much to ignore; he was prosecuted and his father was obliged to part with £30 to have the charges dropped. Captain Gordon also made immediate plans to send Lindsay out of harm’s way to the colonies. The respectable colony of South Australia was chosen.

It wasn’t until August 7th 1853, just 2 months short of his 21th birthday, that Lindsay actually set sail for Adelaide from St Katherine’s Dock in London, aboard the barque *Julia*, and in the interval he had presented himself to Jane Bridges in the hope that she would accept him.

⁹ W. H. Wilde, *Adam Lindsay Gordon* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 3.

¹⁰ Lallah Rookh was the title of a famous romantic poem by Thomas Moore first published in 1817.

Shy, and courteous in the presence of ladies, he had never given her any indication of his feelings for her; she turned him down, and this increased the melancholy with which he approached his banishment, evident in the bitter poem he wrote three days before he sailed. He addressed it to his surviving sister Ignez – who, incidentally, had also gone against parental guidance by having wilfully become engaged to a young Italian. The poem is called:

To My Sister

Across the trackless seas I go,
No matter when or where,
And few my future lot will know,
And fewer still will care.
My hopes are gone, my time is spent,
I little heed their loss,
And if I cannot feel content,
I cannot feel remorse.

My parents bid me cross the flood,
My kindred frowned at me;
They say I have belied my blood,
And stained my pedigree.
But I must turn from those who chide,
And laugh at those who frown;
I cannot quench my stubborn pride,
Nor keep my spirits down.

I once had talents fit to win
Success in life's career,
And if I chose a part of sin,
My choice has cost me dear.
But those who brand me with disgrace
Will scarcely dare to say
They spoke the taint before my face,
And went unscathed away.

My friends will miss a comrade's face,
And pledge me on the seas,
Who shared the wine-cup or the chase,
Or follies worse than these.
A careless smile, a parting glass,
A hand that waves adieu,

Adam Lindsay Gordon

And from my sight they soon will pass,
And from my memory too.

I loved a girl not long ago,
And, till my suit was told,
I thought her breast as fair as snow,
Twas very near as cold;
And yet I spoke, with feelings more
Of recklessness than pain,
Those words I never spoke before,
Nor never shall again.

Her cheek grew pale, in her dark eye
I saw the tear-drop shine;
Her red lips faltered in reply,
And then were pressed to mine,
A quick pulsation of the heart!
A flutter of the breast!
A smothered sob – and thus we part,
To meet no more till death.

And yet I may at times recall
Her memory with a sigh;
At times for me the tears may fall
And dim her sparkling eye.
But absent friends are soon forgot,
And in a year or less
'Twill doubtless be another's lot
Those very lips to press!

With adverse fate we best can cope
When all we prize has fled;
And where there's little left to hope,
There's little left to dread!
Oh, time glides ever quickly by!
Destroying all that's dear;
On earth there's little worth a sigh,
And nothing worth a tear!

What fears have I? What hopes in life?
What joys can I command?
A few short years of toil and strife
In a strange and distant land!

Adam Lindsay Gordon

When green grass sprouts above this clay
(And that might be ere long),
Some friends may read these lines and say,
The world has judged him wrong.

There is a spot not far away
Where my young sister sleeps,
Who seems alive but yesterday,
So fresh her memory keeps;
For we have played in childhood there
Beneath the hawthorn's bough,
And bent our knee in childish prayer
I cannot utter now!

Of late so reckless and so wild,
That spot recalls to me
That I was once a laughing child,
As innocent as she;
And there, while August's wild flow'rs wave,
I wandered all alone,
Strewed blossoms on her little grave,
And knelt beside the stone.

I seem to have a load to bear,
A heavy, choking grief;
Could I have forced a single tear
I might have felt relief.
I think my hot and restless heart
Has scorched the channels dry
From which those sighs of sorrow start
To moisten cheek and eye.

Sister, farewell! Farewell once more
To every youthful tie!
Friends! parents! kinsmen! native shore!
To each and all goodbye!
And thoughts which for the moment seem
To bind me with a spell,
Ambitious hope! love's boyish dream!
To you a last farewell!

This is personal and emotional – the stuff of lyric poetry, written from the strength of an intense experience on the eve of banishment. The

predictable rhythms and rhyming patterns that the poet uses, that really belong more fittingly in action verse, cannot conceal the angst that it expresses. The subject is elegiac, regretting what has gone forever – in this case innocence, ambition and the promise of life ahead – which we shall see was also a characteristic of his writing in Australia. Thirdly, it was – if not dashed off, which perhaps it was – certainly unrevised, a characteristic Lindsay shared with his poetic kinsman Lord Byron whose mother was a Gordon.

That is one type of poem that Gordon wrote. It might be interesting for comparison to dip into another work; a literary ballad written in Australia called “Fauconshawe” Here are a few stanzas as an example:

To fetch clear water out of the spring
The little maid Margaret ran,
From the stream to the castle’s western wing
It was but a bowshot span;
On the sedgy brink where the osiers cling
Lay a dead man, pallid and wan.

The lady Mabel rose from her bed,
And walked in the castle hall,
Where the porch through the western turret led
She met with her handmaid small.
‘What aileth thee, Margaret?’ the lady said,
‘Hast let thy pitcher fall?’

‘Say, what hast thou seen by the streamlet side –
A nymph or a water sprite –
That thou comest with eyes so wild and wide,
And with cheeks so ghostly white?’
‘Nor nymph nor sprite,’ the maiden cried,
‘But the corpse of a slaughtered knight.’

Lady Mabel summons her fiancé, Sir Hugh de Vere, who recognised the slain knight – and it is immediately apparent that Mabel knows him too:

His glance met hers, the twin stood hush’d,
With the dead between them there;
But the blood to her snowy temples rush’d
Till it tinged the roots of her hair,
Then paled, but a thin red streak still flush’d
In the midst of her forehead fair.

Adam Lindsay Gordon

Mabel's guilt is confirmed to Sir Hugh by Margaret her maidservant, who despite the enormity of the accusation she makes, brings proof of Mabel's duplicity:

'Let storm winds eddy, and scream, and hurl
Their wrath, they disturb me naught;
The daughter she of a high-born earl,
No secrets of hers I've sought;
I am but the child of a peasant churl,
Yet look to the proofs I've brought;

'This dagger snapp'd so close to the hilt –
Dost remember thy token well?
Will it match with the broken blade that spilt
His life in the western dell?
Nay! read her handwriting, an thou wilt,
From her paramour's breast it fell.'

Sir Hugh confronts Mabel, but she refuses to either confirm or deny her hand in the knight's murder:

''Tis little,' he said, 'that I know or care
Of the guilt (if guilt there be)
That lies 'twixt thee and yon dead man there,
Nor matters it now to me;
I thought thee pure, thou art only fair,
And tomorrow I cross the sea.

'He perish'd! I ask not why or how:
I come to recall my troth;
Take back, my lady, thy broken vow,
Give back my allegiance oath;
Let the past be buried between us now
For ever – 'tis best for both.

'Yet, Mabel, I could ask, dost thou dare
Lay hand on that corpse's heart,
And call on thy Maker, and boldly swear
That thou hadst in his death no part?
I ask not, while threescore proofs I share
With one doubt – uncondemn'd thou art.'

Adam Lindsay Gordon

Oh! cold and bleak upon Mabel's cheek
Came the blast of the storm-wind keen,
And her tresses black as the glossy back
Of the raven, glanced between
Her fingers slight, like the ivory white,
As she parted their sable sheen.

Yet with steady lip, and with fearless eye,
And with cheek like the flush of dawn,
Unflinchingly she spoke in reply –
'Go hence with the break of morn,
I will neither confess, nor yet deny,
I will return thee scorn for scorn.'

The knight bow'd low as he turn'd to go;
He travell'd by land and sea,
But naught of his future fate I know,
And naught of his fair ladye; --
My story is told as, long ago,
My story was told to me.

The poem is probably one of the most successful of Gordon's reconstituted traditional ballads, which though melodramatic are colourful and entertaining. It's interesting that the protagonist of this one, de Vere, is betrayed by the woman he has been betrothed to, a constant theme of Gordon's, and that she is a dark and vengeful character – as seen in the poem's gothic description of her. But at the same time, in other works Gordon is beginning to accommodate, very slightly, his new environment into his verse – which, although transposed to the Australian scene, continues the theme of banishment, sorrow and recrimination that we saw in the poem addressed to his sister that he wrote in London before he left for Australia.

This is an anguished example:

'Whisperings in Wattle Boughs'

Oh, gaily sings the bird, and the wattle-boughs are stirr'd
And rustled by the scented breath of spring;
Oh, the dreary, wistful longing! Oh, the faces that are thronging!
Oh, the voices that are vaguely whispering!

Oh, tell me, father mine, ere the good ship cross'd the brine,

On the gangway one mute hand-grip we exchanged,
Do you, past the grave, employ, for your stubborn reckless boy,
Those petitions that in life were ne'er estranged?

Oh, tell me, sister dear, parting word and parting tear
Never pass'd between us; -- let me bear the blame.
Are you living, girl, or dead? bitter tears since then I've shed
For the lips that lisp'd with mine a mother's name.

Oh, tell me, ancient friend, ever ready to defend,
In our boyhood, at the base of life's long hill,
Are you waking yet, or sleeping? have you left this vale of weeping?
Or do you, like your comrade, linger still?

Oh, whisper, buried love, is there rest and peace above? --
There is little hope or comfort here below; --
On your sweet face lies the mould, and your bed is straight and cold --
Near the harbour where the sea-tides ebb and flow.

All silent -- they are dumb -- and the breezes go and come
With an apathy that mocks at man's distress;
Laugh, scoffer, while you may! I could bow me down and pray
For an answer that might stay my bitterness.

Oh, harshly screams the bird! and the wattle-bloom is stirr'd!
There's a sullen weird-like whisper in the bough:
'Aye, kneel, and pray, and weep, but HIS BELOVED SLEEP
CAN NEVER BE DISTURB'D BY SUCH AS THOU !!'

Edith Humphries and Douglas Sladen, Gordon's early biographers have tabulated his experiences in Australia¹¹; while another of his early biographers, who wrote in 1892, leaves a highly-coloured but indicative description of him:

In general build, Gordon was tall and gaunt, with a stoop in his gait that was attributed to his short-sightedness. An enthusiastic friend one described him as 'looking like an ancient Viking, and riding like an Assyrian of old' ... His appearance, though eccentric, was fascinating and commanded respect. He had a

¹¹ Edith Humphries, & Douglas Sladen, *Adam Lindsay Gordon and his Friends in England and Australia* (London: Constable, 1912).

large, well-formed head, covered with short, curly brown hair, and a pale complexion, and the whole contour of his face, says the Rev. E. [sic] T. Woods, 'reminded one a good deal of the portraits of Byron.'¹²

The ship *Julia* on which he left London docked in Adelaide on 14th November 1853, and three days later, having employed none of the letters of introduction he had been given, including one to the Governor, he enlisted in the South Australian Mounted Police Force. He was stationed in Penola, a little town of Scottish settlers near Mount Gambier, which he called the little town where he learned to live again.

His duties were to clear out the stables, look after stolen cattle when they were taken to water, get the hay, which came 'very seldom' into the loft, fetch wood for the cook, take night guard about once a fortnight, or patrol, which was still more rare. When the barracks were full he had to guard and escort prisoners at the sessions and he was liable to be sent out into the country to apprehend folk who do what's wrong.¹³

Another early biographer, Alexander Sutherland, (1898), re-tells one of Gordon's stories from this time:

He had been directed to conduct a lunatic to the nearest asylum, two hundred miles away. The madman was mounted on a young half-broken colt. The trooper, with his pistols and loaded carbine strapped to the saddle, curvetted along on his excellent horse. At night they slept in the open air beneath the handiest tree, Gordon fastening his prisoner's hand to his own with the handcuffs, as the surest way of keeping him secure. The lunatic was very restless, and Gordon's long day was followed by a sleepless night. Once or twice, after being

¹² J Howlett-Ross, *A Memoir of the Life of Adam Lindsay Gordon*, with new poems, prose sketches, political speeches and reminiscences, and an 'In Memoriam' by Kendall William W. Gibbings (London: W.W. Gibbings, 1892), p.15.

¹³ Geoffrey Hutton, *Adam Lindsay Gordon: The Man and the Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p. 58.

awakened for the twentieth time, he uttered some awful threats in order to quieten his crazy charge, but in the morning the madman has a chance of turning the tables. Gordon with thoughtless good humour set the man on his own excellent horse, while he himself cantered on in front upon the half-broken beast. But he had forgotten all about the loaded carbine in the saddle, and ere they had gone half a mile he had a sudden reminder in the shape of a bullet that whistled past him. Facing round, he became aware of the situation. The two were alone in the wilderness, and though he might have the advantage in sanity, the other had all the arms, and had, besides, the memory of that midnight score to wipe off. It was a trying juncture, and it required all Gordon's persuasiveness to get out of it.¹⁴

He lasted two years in the force – the story goes that one day his superior officer officiously ordered Gordon to shine his boots, whereupon the offended Gordon threw the boots at their owner and immediately resigned. However, during his period with the police he had struck up acquaintances that helped him move to his next stage of life, horse-breaking and horse-racing, and eventually, poetry writing. One of these acquaintances was the Catholic scientist-priest at Penola, Fr Julian Tenison-Woods, the man who later helped Mary MacKillop set up the Order of St Joseph.

Tenison-Woods, struck by the unlikely familiarity Gordon had with Homer, whose work he could quote extensively, began to draw him out and to lend him books. Another acquaintance was William Trainor, whom he had first met when he and his sergeant were on duty at a travelling circus. At a given moment, a drunken man entered the tent, so convincingly that the sergeant immediately arrested him and gave Gordon the responsibility of conveying him to the lock-up. But on arrival, Gordon discovered that Trainor was actually one of the circus clowns acting his part as a drunk. After he left the force, he found Trainor had given up the circus and gone into horse-breaking, so the two men went into the business together and lived together for some years, sharing a love of literature and story-telling.

¹⁴

This incident is related by Frank Maldon Robb from the Sutherland biography, in *The Development of Australian Literature* (New York: Longmans Green, 1898), and republished in the 1975 Rigby edition of Gordon's work *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*, p. xxxv.

These developments were gradually rekindling Gordon's itch to write, which had pretty much lain dormant since his arrival in South Australia. It was a time when he could also return to the sport he loved, horse-racing, and soon he began to enter race meetings with his own horses. He had gained a reputation as a daring and fearless rider while in the police force, and now he was following all the race-meetings he could in both South Australia and western Victoria. He would not compete in races on the flat, but always in steeple-chase or hurdle events, where his intrepid nature often resulted in injury and he had many falls.

It was as the result of one of these that in 1862, at the age of 29, with several broken bones, he was laid up in the inn near Robe where he was nursed by the landlord's 18-year-old niece Maggie Park. He is reported to have proposed to her thus:

Well, girl, I like your ways. You seem industrious
and sensible. If you like I will take a cottage in Robe
and we will get married next week, and you shall
keep home for me.¹⁵

They spent two happy years in a little stone cottage near Mt Gambier, which he called 'Dingley Dell', and then in 1864 he was astonished to learn that he had inherited more than £7,000 from his mother's estate. This, if it had been prudently invested, should have given Gordon security for the rest of his life, but it was not to be. In the same year he published, in pamphlet form, 30 copies of *The Feud*, which he described as 'A Border Ballad'. It was sold at a bazaar held to raise money for a hospital in Mount Gambier. Gordon was now an accepted member of local society, and the next year he was invited to stand for election to the South Australian Parliament.

Although reluctant, he was persuaded, and embarked on a marathon electioneering ride, accompanied by his old friend William Trainor, with the result that on election day, 16th March 1865 he defeated the sitting member by three votes, and he and his wife moved to Adelaide. On 20th September of the same year he won the Adelaide Grand National, then went to Ballarat where he also won the Ballarat Handicap Steeplechase. (On a horse called 'Ballarat'!)

¹⁵

Douglas Sladen, *Adam Lindsay Gordon, the Life and Best Poems of the Poet of Australia*, The Westminster Abbey Memorial Volume (London: Hutchinson, 1934), pp.87-88.

Although he conscientiously attended to his commitments, his career in Parliament was inglorious, and he resigned at the end of 1866. With some of his inheritance he had purchased land in Western Australia and went there to look at it. He had also made other investments in land and horses in South Australia. Meanwhile, he had continued to ride in steeplechases, and although he was receiving an income from his inheritance he had invested this unwisely and before long much of it had been dissipated.

After publishing *The Feud* he had begun to submit work to a couple of Melbourne papers – where he had gone to ride (unsuccessfully) his horse ‘Cadger’, and he began to attract the attention of the Melbourne literary coterie which included George Gordon McCrae and later Marcus Clarke and Henry Kendall. *Ye Weary Wayfarer*, a long poem in eight parts which concludes with the famous lines I quoted at the beginning, came out in a sporting paper called *Bell’s Life in Victoria* and in 1867 his long verse-drama *Ashtaro*¹⁶ in the newly founded *Australasian*. Then in September, the Melbourne publisher George Robertson put out, at Gordon’s expense, 500 copies of *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*, to indifferent reviews and poor sales. The cost of publication was £50, which was not recouped, to Gordon’s bitter disappointment.

Gordon now moved to Ballarat, where he bought Craig’s Livery Stables, setting up in a business that required a book-keeper as well as a horseman, and to complete the purchase Gordon was required to take out a mortgage on his last remaining piece of land, the farm at Penola. Needing a partner who could keep the books, he chose Harry Mount, described by Frank Maldon Robb as “...one of the most brilliant amateur horsemen of the Colony...”; but Robb continues, “One cannot help feeling that a good steady man with a head for figures would have served Gordon’s purpose better than this young fellow, who lingered over his glass and his game of billiards at Craig’s Hotel.”

Plain bad luck seems to have set in for Gordon in Ballarat. It was here that his only child, ten-month old Annie Lindsay Gordon, died, at a time when Gordon had been confined to bed for many weeks with a particularly bad fall from a lively young horse which had smashed his head against a hardwood gatepost in the stables. Gordon’s near-sightedness may

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According to the *Columbia Encyclopaedia* this is the Hebrew plural form of Ashtoreth, the name of the Canaanite fertility goddess and consort of Baal. Her name is vocalized in Greek as *Astarte*. She was worshiped at various local shrines. There are several references to her in the Bible. This poem is a Medieval romance, however,

have contributed to this accident, as he said afterwards that he did not see the post when the horse swerved. The accident left a dent in his skull but the most damage at this time may have been to his state of mind, as he had been passionately fond of his daughter and according to his friends he was never the same afterwards.

His passion for racing was still strong, and he took increased risks, half-hoping, according to a letter he wrote at this time about his financial situation, that he might be killed doing it. He extricated himself from Ballarat and moved to Melbourne, where in quick succession he won the Melbourne Hunt Club Cup, the Metropolitan Steeplechase and the Selling Steeplechase. Now the possibility of earning a living from writing alone was beginning to appear as a reality – he had an offer to be sporting journalist for the *Australasian*, but he did not accept it because although still keen to race he was weary of the environment of the racecourse and the people who surrounded him there.

It was at this time that he wrote *The Sick Stockrider* which was published in the *Colonial Monthly* and was immediately popular with the reading public, much to Gordon's astonishment, for he was reported as saying "these verses made quite a stir in Melbourne, and have been spoken of with praise, but I do not think much of them myself." He was now a member of the newly-formed Yorick Club in Melbourne through which he formed a friendship with fellow poet Henry Kendall. Despite the positive influence of his small circle of literary friends, he was growing more and more despondent and his increasing insomnia possibly indicates the extent of his growing depression. Living at Brighton, he joined the Brighton Artillery Corps and despite his poor eyesight took up rifle shooting.

In 1868, Gordon had received word from an uncle that the old estate of his great-grandfather Robert Gordon of Esslemont had passed to a female heir and he was advised to lay claim to it through the terms of its entailment.¹⁷ This was when the Gordons were in Ballarat, and Gordon was not disposed to do anything about it. The next year, however, with debts pressing upon him and learning that Mrs Woldridge, to whom the estate had been bequeathed was wealthy in her own right, he sought advice in Melbourne and was referred to an advocate in Edinburgh whose 'opinion' reached him in January 1870. Acting on this advice he went ahead; he borrowed from friends until this became an embarrassment for him, then resorted to a moneylender, all in the expectation that he would succeed in

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Hugh Anderson (ed), *The Last Letters 1868-1870: Adam Lindsay Gordon to John Riddoch* (Melbourne: The Hawthorne Press, 1970).

his claim to Esslemont and its accrued income of £2,000 a year. In his despondent state he was motivated by the desire to provide for his wife, as he felt that time was running out for him. In a couple of months his loan was swallowed up and he began to run up bills, all on the basis of his expectations. Then, to raise some ready cash, he agreed to ride for one last time in a race on 12th March. He led the field until his horse fell at the log fence but despite a dangerous fall he jumped to his feet, re-mounted and again led the field, dizzy and swaying in the saddle until his horse, at the last fence, fell again and Gordon was again thrown heavily. This time he was taken to a doctor and was found to have internal injuries as well as further injuries to his already battered head. Nevertheless as soon as he was able, and cheered by some favourable notices for his first book in England, he went on with his preparation of another book of verse, *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* which again was to be published at his own expense and in order to tide him over his difficulties went again to a moneylender and took a small loan at what amounted to an interest rate of 90%.

Then in June came the news from Edinburgh that the Esslemont entail had been abolished by an Act passed in 1848. For two days, in a fit of inconsolable despondency, he wandered the streets of Melbourne; on June 23rd his book was published and with the statement of its cost in his pocket he met his friends Marcus Clarke and Henry Kendall, the latter showing him the proof of a laudatory critique he had written for the *Australasian*. That night he went to bed early, rose at daybreak and went out onto the wintry Brighton beach, lay down and with his rifle resting on his chest and with a piece of forked ti-tree stick to pull the trigger, ended his life. He was buried in Brighton cemetery, in a situation not dissimilar to that of his most memorable poetic creation, “the Sick Stockrider”.

Just one question remains. Was Gordon a great Australian – or Scottish-Australian – poet? After his death he was certainly judged to be so. And at the time he was. His verses spoke to the isolated individualists; the settler, the stockman, to those of some education and to those of none, and, most particularly, to all who struggled to find themselves and a meaning to their lives in the vast wilderness of a new country. It was Douglas Sladen, his greatest literary backer, who organised the petition for his bust in Westminster Abbey, and who in 1912, wrote this assessment of his work:

Adam Lindsay Gordon was the national poet of Australia not only because he was a real poet and wrote living poetry about the romantic old colonial days when Australia was in the making, but because he was a typical example of the fine strain which

gave the Australian people its greatest qualities ... The Kendall method produced the better poetry, and more good writing, but the world at large will always be more interested in dramatic lyrics, and personally I think that Gordon, with his literary off-spring Rudyard Kipling, stands at the very top of this form of writing.¹⁸

And there I think is the answer. Gordon *was* great, not so much as a poet, but as an icon, a figure easily transposed into myth. A rebellious, devil-may-care under-dog, shy, caring, loyal, fearless, with a well-hidden sensitive side, he fits the kind of legend that later became the Anzac legend; part of the concept of being Australian that Australians like to accept as part of themselves. And this I consider to be his permanent niche in Australian history in general, and in our literary history in particular.

¹⁸

Edith Humphries, & Douglas Sladen, *Adam Lindsay Gordon and his Friends in England and Australia* (London: Constable, 1912), p 254.