

Castlemaine - A Reflection

By Katherine E Seppings

It is Autumn in Castlemaine. Early April. The leaves are turning and falling; the light is glowing amber, gold, yellow. The sky is a paler blue. Brilliant pink and vermilion mackerel painted sunsets promise rain, again and again.

The weather is perfect, gentle, warm, still days, day after day... the summer cyclic threats of wildfire abated. But - no decent rain for weeks. Just a few drops. Pitter-patter, stop. Dust hangs orange on the horizon, late afternoon; smoke drifts in from burning off, somewhere... Most likely some other place that already had rain. We seem to miss out on rain, here, in Castlemaine.

Ah, the rain that never comes. Clouds that lie. Rain that goes around us, rain that ends up somewhere else. Sweeping, mocking, cool changes. Hot desert blow-dryer winds that make way for cruel southerly gusts - from Antarctica. Chilled further by rain hugging the coast and sometimes by rain that makes it over the Divide.

Sometimes rain dumps bucket loads down on a singled-out hill. All of a sudden: a major cloud burst. You can't see a thing if you're driving, even with windscreen wipers working flat out. On New Year's Day, 1889, one of these huge monsoonal cloudbursts washed away nearly all the bridges along Forest Creek.

Drowned a couple of miners down deep shafts.

Chance to wash clean that particular valley, give the flats a good soak, bring up the fodder and the flowers and the fish. To flush paths and gullies, form creeks and rivers, force back the salt.

Ah, the emptiness of our waterways...

Long, wide cracks in the earth appear where once, briefly (brief as spring), there was lawn out the front and back of my place and I had to pay someone to cut it. Strange to think of the smell of freshly cut grass now. With no rain. But with such a wind that rips peeling bark off eucalypts in readiness to catch the rain in rivulets. When it comes.

Oh, the untidiness of the Bush, crackling underfoot. Ungroomed and unlike Europe, unlike our inner selves, mostly from somewhere else.

Even if it is generations back we came as overlander, adventurer, gold-seeker, pioneer, outcast or refugee. We still haven't come to terms with where we really are. How dry it really is. How hard the ground is. How the country is meant to burn.

Oh the snakes and spiders and scorpions and flies and mosquitoes and ants...

Oh the frost, harsh as intense heat, white as a first snowfall, freezing everything!

Here in Castlemaine we are linked to our ancestral pasts through old stone walls and bulbs and briar rose. Everything left from the past becomes a metaphor for a moment in bravery. The decision to come here. And stay. To live with isolation and fragmentation and dis-location of previous cultures. To make our homes in an unforgiving natural environment. To endure the harshness and extremes. To bear the intensity of the light.

One evening there was a brief shower of rain. The sun was still shining, but a few minutes of "out-of-the-blue" rain settled the dust, filling the air with that wonderful smell of damp earth and grass and negative ions. A flock of galahs grazing flew up to the wire that brings power to the house and hung upside down with wings fully outstretched. What a way to have a wash!

We wait for rain that cleans trees and gives back colour and life to all things growing. Rain that reveals more broken bits and pieces of the past. Once, gold. 'There is gold in them thar hills' says the autumn light on the surrounding bush-clad hills. Dry-stick country drenched in golden light. Hills that enclose us. Hills that hold us and keep us in. A sense of belonging that keeps us from being somewhere else.

Like the sea, or like lands where it rains more than here.

From my front verandah I look out over a small lake. A lone black swan drifts. The water level keeps getting lower. I wonder how long it will take to fill up when it rains and then overflow, into the creek. I wonder, like most people, whether or not it *will* rain. Today or tomorrow, or ever again. Properly. Sufficiently. Will the creeks and rivers ever flow efficiently, again? Or shall we continue to see dams built to catch precious run-off. Drying up the flow. Inviting the sea in, unchallenged.