

Mary Gilmore: harmony in contradiction and the preservation of Australian history.

Hannah Hogg

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Mary Gilmore was a woman who keenly felt her responsibility in initiating social change and preserving history, placing in the pages of her own historical recollections, letters and literary work her often resolute opinions regarding how society should function, and she publicised her opinions somewhat irrespective of whether her audience agreed or wished to be told. She was a woman who embodied the complexity of human life, showing throughout her lengthy career the ability for a single person to hold seemingly contradictory beliefs, and to be shaped and changed as life and circumstance altered. Gilmore's personal and literary letters show an identifiable awareness that what she was writing was being written partially for the sake of preserving both Australian history and her own work, and they also provide small flickers of understanding in the examination of a woman who was seemingly impossible to clearly or consistently define according to beliefs.

Gilmore's promotion of the preservation of her work, which could initially be labelled as simply self-promotion, instead shows the candid personality and opinions that made her a remarkable and intriguing Australian woman. As Catalano states, "Gilmore could be an obstinate person.... She had an opinion on just about every subject imaginable and never failed to express it as forcefully as she could in countless letters to the press" (2001, p. 55). And yet, in response to realising that some women were intimidated by her, Gilmore's remarks in a letter to W. A. Woods in 1903 show that while Gilmore's pen could be fierce, her personality was underpinned by a surprisingly mild disposition and approach to people: "I *couldn't* quarrel, the words wouldn't come; a sort of dumb feeling takes possession of me

when anything like that approaches me. On the other hand, if anything caused me to think I ought to go out and preach at street corners, nothing would stop me. Duty – or contract – must be obeyed – it is one thing that lifts man above the brute” (Gilmore, 1980, p. 17). There was a marked difference in Gilmore’s persona as a social activist and her often under-confident reflections on her own merit and skill. However, Gilmore’s boldness in expression and immense kindness as a human being are equally authentic. There is no arrogance or aggression evident in Dame Mary’s life or writing. She was deeply humbled by the admiration of the Australian public, and was particularly grateful to her literary peers for their support and advocacy of her, a gratefulness which her letters often reflected. She was a woman who fluctuated between confidence and surprise at the development throughout her life of her place as an icon in Australian literary history.

Gilmore’s letters to George Blakemore give a clear picture that, as well-known as Gilmore became, she was a woman who never forgot the towns in which she had grown up and the lasting effect many of these rural areas had on her as a person and as a writer. Her effusive response to George Blakemore, the principal of the Teachers’ College at Wagga, regarding the dedication of a set of gates in her honour, forms an aspect of the Regional Archives collection that is particularly appealing to local audiences, given the affection with which Gilmore recalls her Wagga heritage. She wrote to Blakemore in October 1955, “You could not have thought of anything so much to my heart as *gates*. Even the Bible had gates in its heart! It is worth all the statues, however wonderful. Statues belong to art; even to the timeless, in a way. But gates belong to life and to men” (RW 114/3-a). This eagerness to express sincere gratitude and kindness underpins many of Gilmore’s letters, and the balance between her forcefulness and her simultaneous uncertainty about the value of her poetry and, at times, herself, shows her humility. She continues the letter to Blakemore by stating that she

thinks she is Wagga Wagga's oldest citizen, and that it is the town to which she still belongs (Gilmore, RW 114/3-a). Wagga is recurringly referred to throughout her writing in both prose and verse with recurring nostalgia and fondness, and she has been willingly and aptly claimed by Wagga as a notable former citizen. In another letter to Blakemore, she encloses a small amount of money and requests that it be used to purchase a book in which "...events, people & autographs..." can be collected, to start "...a continuous history for the next hundred years of the College..." (Gilmore, RW 114/3-c). The correspondence between Blakemore and Gilmore that is held in the archive collection shows, perhaps above all else, the way in which Gilmore succeeded in instigating and aiding the preservation of the history of the area through the unique perspective of a rural Australian woman.

Gilmore showed a profound understanding that, as a woman, her position in literature and society must endure and navigate challenges rarely faced by the male counterparts of her lifespan. Modjeska aptly points out that Gilmore "...felt very acutely the tension between her relationship to a literary heritage she admired and her marginal position as a woman and a writer in a society that valued neither women nor writers and scorned its critics" (1982, p. 228). However, this position varied as her life and circumstances changed; her time as a young single woman is contrasted against her early married life. Her letters show her frankness as a social critic, while her poetry reveals the tension and distress of attempting to balance her literary position with her duties as a mother and wife. Gilmore recounts her time as a young woman teaching at Illabo School to Shirley Hillow with light-hearted exuberance (RW 40/101), but this recollection of rural life contrasts starkly with the discontentment Gilmore felt about being constrained to William Gilmore's family farm at Casterton upon their return to Australia from the Cosme Settlement. It was in those years as a young mother and wife at Casterton that Gilmore was most "...troubled by the inner conflict between her

conscience ordering her to concentrate on her domestic duties to husband and child and the vital impulse demanding her fulfilment as a writer” (Moore, 1980, p. xviii). It is clear that Gilmore’s unhappiness was mostly due to her apparent separation from the intellectual stimulation of the city (Modjeska, 1982, p. 229). Gilmore’s genuine love for the land and its people is inevitably contrasted against her discontentment about being physically isolated from the intellectual, literary world in which she so profoundly desired a place, a place which was already made more fragile and difficult to attain due to the gender inequalities of her era.

To conclude that Gilmore was discontent with her position in life must not be done without also acknowledging the poetry that articulates Gilmore’s deep love for her husband and son, as well as her somewhat complicated but typically passionate poetic response to love. As Walker states, Gilmore was conflicted:

...between sensuality and commitment... Her attitude to love is based upon a series of binary oppositions: the instinct of the passionate heart is opposed to the notion of ‘contract’ and self-denial which she had absorbed from her puritanical upbringing. Superimposed upon this is the traditional opposition of the genders and their roles, whether ‘natural’ or imposed by religion and society (1992, p. 15).

It is evident throughout all of Gilmore’s writing, whether prose, poetry, or personal letters, that she was deeply convicted about life and love, although the latter ceased to take precedence in her poetry once she was no longer living with her husband. The early years of her marriage are characterised by fervent and impassioned poems that speak of her love for him, but there is also a growing undercurrent of a lack of contentment with certain aspects and expectations of domestic life, despite the pragmatism with which Gilmore often wrote of her circumstances. Gilmore’s poetry suggests she found it very difficult to be left alone while Will Gilmore was away working. ‘To You’ (2004, p. 270) has a slightly wistful tone, while ‘Home Love’ shows her belief in the purity and esteem of her domestic role, as she states ‘For here abide that love of wife and child / That keeps a nation strong – and undefiled’

(Gilmore, 2004, p. 368). As always, Gilmore's forward-thinking literary mind is pitted against her traditional domesticated beliefs. Gilmore's adoration for her husband is clear in a letter written to him in Cosme in 1899, in which Gilmore states "I often wonder if the thought of me gives you such joy as the thought of you gives me, yet I think it can't because I am not as good and as gentle – as great dispositioned as you, and then I think perhaps it does because you love me, dear" (1980, p. 9). Although it seems that Gilmore's desire for a literary life eventually prevailed over the marital expectations of the time and her expectations of herself, both her early poetry and private correspondence are underpinned by loyalty and devotion to her husband and son and the marital love she clearly cherished as a new bride.

The sheer volume of Gilmore's work, regardless of the dubious quality of some of it, clearly evidences her ability to engage with the joys and difficulties of urban and rural existence. Gilmore wrote, upon learning to write as a child, that it was as though "...the gates of the world had opened. I had wings. I could not help writing" (1986, p. 71). However, her clear passion and talent for creative work was conflicted with her conservative belief in suppressing the creative impulses that formed the foundation of much of her work. It is in the absence of personal life details in her letters that the realisation can be found that Gilmore, known as she was for her bold voice, rarely revealed details of her private life even to her close friends. Throughout much of her life "...she confronted with fortitude and not without pain the contradictory movement between the desire for love and the need for independence" (Modjeska, 1982, p. 228). Despite her silence about the most personal and private aspects of these issues, the vulnerability of Gilmore's desires and struggles can be found no more clearly than in her poetry, especially that which was written in the early days of her marriage.

Much can be gleaned from the moments within Gilmore's letters that show the strength of her personal belief that poetry and domesticity could not co-exist. It is not clear from either Gilmore's poetry or letters what her husband felt about her responsibilities as his wife and what could arguably be described as her responsibility to Australia as a writer. Gilmore was conflictingly bound to the social and marital expectations of the time.

Woman:

I am the giver:
My hands have baked your bread,
They fed you when you hungered,
They laid the pillow for your bed,
Sickness and sorrow comforted
Without complaint, ungrudgingly;
My eyes have bled their tears for you:
What have you done for me?
(Gilmore, 'Life-song', 2004, p. 259).

Her poetic responses to this issue are widespread and varying in tone. 'Life-song' begins to touch on the self-sacrificial love of a wife for her husband, a theme upon which 'The Woman', 'Closed is the Door', and 'Of Women' further elaborate, although the tone shifts between the joyful and thankful upraised voice of acceptance and restrained anguish in response to the restrictions of domestic life. 'I am not very patient / Yet patient I must be / With him beside my pillow / And the babe upon my knee' ('The Woman', 2004, p. 278).

Gilmore's own personal struggles can also be recognised in the final stanza of 'The Woman': 'Strange that I was given / Thoughts that soar to heaven, / Yet must I sit and keep / Children in their sleep!' (2004, p. 279), and as Walker (1992, p. 17) suggests, the poem shows Gilmore's bitterness about the differences in the roles of men and women. It is in these moments of poetic honesty that Gilmore can be seen as both a fierce, strong-willed woman with outspoken opinions and forceful ideas, and a vulnerable young writer attempting to forge a literary identity in a challenging social climate. Given her circumstances, it is hardly surprising that there are self-doubts, insecurities, irreconcilable desires, and restless hopes present in her letters and poetry. Each contradiction, each seemingly incongruent belief and

life choice can be scrutinised and understood in a way that illuminates that Gilmore was not inconsistent or confusing in her beliefs; she was simply a woman who lived out the complexity of life, and whose changes and contradictions in beliefs and ideas were made more visible through her willingness to share her opinions and stories over the course of a long life.

To read through the collection at the Regional Archives is to discover the maturity with which Gilmore looked back over her life and her gradual progression into some measure of acceptance of her own self-compulsion to be writer and to have a voice in Australia. The collection shows her profound understanding of herself, her literary desires, and the norms of the society in which she lived, as well as her awareness of how she differed from those norms and expectations. The growth of her self-assurance as her self-acceptance and security in the literary world increased is also evident in many of her forthright letters. Moore (1980, p. xviii) articulates that Gilmore's emotional state and the timidity of being an amateur writer in those early years eventually turned into a confidence that supported her emotions with professional and intelligent keenness. Located in Casterton in 1903, Gilmore wrote to A. G. Stephens regarding the internal struggle of being a mother and a writer:

I haven't physique to be two things even if the day had hours enough to allow it, & if I give way to writing & to dreams of writing the temptation to more & more to the neglect of other things manifestly more right to do, the desire will grow, & with desire freedom of capacity in exercise. With practice one increases in power of expression & with growth of power comes better work, & with better work greater love for it till one is given over body and soul to the work – at least that is how it would be with me (1980, p. 30).

To perceive Dame Mary's progression beyond this point into a life which acknowledged the respect and emphasis she placed on motherhood and domestic duties but also allowed her the freedom to use her remarkable gift for writing to the extent where she was identified and known as a great writer in Australian history is both a sobering and joyous experience.

In the midst of the acclaim afforded to her over the course of her extensive life, Gilmore remained a woman firmly aware of where she had come from and how much her experiences of rural culture had influenced her understanding of Australian society as it developed amongst triumphs and failures. She was also clearly conscious of how much of her writing material came out of her rural experiences. Her love of history and the many tales of unique rural Australian lives she documented caused Dame Mary to see the value of Wagga. Often reminiscing about the town in letters, Gilmore urged her contacts in Wagga to preserve the unique history of the area.

“I am a very tired, aged, over-worked woman; you [George Blakemore] have a whole college of young people, who will later on go all over the State. Make them your collectors of Australiana, which will include all our writers and even me. Create, in them, a feeling of duty, in this, to future literature, to Australia, and to their own college” (RW 114/2-a).

Gilmore, focused as she was on present life and her ideological aspirations for both present and future generations, never failed to recognise and integrate into her opinions the value of the past and its influence on the present. Gilmore “...grew to young womanhood witnessing and contributing to the first lusty stirrings of nationalism; in the ensuing length of years granted to her she grew to be a national figure, insistently urging Australia forward into a position of independence and growing prestige in the eyes of the world” (Wilde, 1980, p. xxi). She was simultaneously and comfortably an advocate of change and preservation. The well-known reply she sent to Blakemore to be read at the opening of the Dame Mary Gilmore Memorial Gates is rightfully iconic:

Memory is life’s greatest gift to man. It has made all things possible to him in his upward climb from the ooze to the aeroplane. It is the link that binds life and mind, perception and reason; and it gave man yesterday and tomorrow. Without memory there would be nothing but an unrecorded NOW. And if all this is true of man it is equally true of places, for memory is history (RW 114/3-e).

It is sobering and yet invigorating to hold the original letter, complete with smudge marks and sections Gilmore crossed out and rephrased, and to find in the handwritten thoughts of Gilmore the ability to access her thoughts and through them develop an understanding of her indebtedness to rural culture and rural experience. The necessity of the past to the future is a lesson powerfully learnt from Gilmore.

Gilmore not only encouraged others to collect and record historical tales, she also devoted much of her time as a writer to recording the adventures and experiences of her younger years. "Old Days: Old Ways" (1986) presents Gilmore at her most entertaining and also at her least entertaining. The stories fluctuate between being humorous and unconsciously witty to being laden with intricate and time-specific details about the people who populated the farms and towns of the Riverina in the latter nineteenth century, information which, although highly regarded by Gilmore, holds little general interest apart from painting a nuanced picture of rural life in that time period. It is the stories of lost hope and bitter lives, of dry and persistent humour in the face of adversity that most fully capture one of Gilmore's greatest skills – the ability to understand and articulate the lived experiences of humanity in all of their complexity.

Her people live their lives against the background of the unyielding land itself, demanding its constant fill of lost hopes and causes, wasted efforts, abandoned shacks and shallow graves. Yet it occasionally offered, in temporary appeasement, beauty, visions, and promises that left those who saw and experienced them defenceless against its lure (Wilde, 1969, p. 12).

As much as Gilmore was a capable and avid historian, she was foremost a storyteller, and the triumph of her historical work lies more in her talent in recounting human experience and emotion than in the purely factual, historical details of bygone lives.

Despite the vivacious and often captivating attraction of Gilmore's occasionally unconventional writing style (Wilde, 1969, p. 13), there is a particular complication in Gilmore's historical work, one that has created significant discussion and some level of controversy.

Although Mary Gilmore was one of Australia's best known – and finest – poets, her position as a writer and as an intellectual was always precarious. This uneasy position is thrown into relief by her famous, or infamous, autobiographical embellishments. While meticulous in her accumulation of detail about pioneering life when self-consciously recording 'history', Mary Gilmore had a very loose sense of historical accuracy in her presentation of her own past. Her exaggerated and often dubious accounts of incidents from her life are usually excused as endearing eccentricities (Modjeska, 1982, p. 231).

However, there is little doubt that the worth of Gilmore's historical recollections should not be disregarded simply due to the fabrications that are woven into them. It is noteworthy that the writing style in "Old Days: Old Ways" (1986) bears significant similarities to the written expression found in the letters Gilmore wrote that recounted history – Gilmore's voice is easily recognisable in all its forms. The Regional Archives collection shows that her intermittent accuracy in the recording of her own life is of little consequence when viewed in the context of how much she has given Australia and the greater purpose and triumph of her work in its ability to convey human feeling and thought.

There is a sense that the worth of what Gilmore gave Australia in her recollections, letters, and poems has little to do with factual truth. As Heyward comments, Gilmore can be remembered "...as a restless activist for Australian letters. She read everything, spoke to everyone, wrote to everyone, and worked tirelessly to promote that which she thought worthy of being read. Her preoccupation with posterity wasn't about her own work so much as that of others and the larger landscape and history of Australian writing" (2013, p. 60). Her self-assuredness about her rightfully afforded place in Australian history arose more from what she believed she could offer in regard to history and stories, rather than from vanity or a

belief in her own personal talent. She was the only voice that could share her unique experiences, and she felt her responsibility to do so for the greater good of society. Within all of her work, even some of her poetry, there is an unceasing and vivacious preoccupation with preserving Australian history through letters, stories, facts, and recollections.

Gilmore showed an uninhibited exuberance for life that seems to have rarely been dimmed, and it appears to have significantly contributed to her strength of mind and character. Gilmore's talents, vivacity, and intelligence as a young teacher in a challenging school are clearly visible as she recounts her time at Illabo School in a letter to Shirley Hillow (RW 40/101).

Miss Sawyer used a big cane & often, I was told, & had such trouble with the boys that they often kicked her when being caned. People said, when I went there, "you will never manage without a cane" – I never had a cane inside the door, and I never had trouble with the children. There were no books among the people at Illabo, & so, as a reward for a week (when I found the children responded to kindness & understanding) I used to take the last half home on Friday to read to them. I read "Uncle Tom's Cabin", "Robinson Crusoe" & other well-known books in this way. It was rough country & rough times when I was there. (RW 40/101)

Gilmore understood the power of literature and education, and her approach to teaching, unlike Miss Sawyer's, achieved harmony and successful control in an apparently problematic classroom. Gilmore was often an unorthodox woman, with various conservative beliefs contrasted against quite controversial views. As Fitzgerald states, she was magnificently diverse, "...a poet who has written on many subjects, earnestly, with purpose and high conscientiousness... History, tradition, race and inheritance had her absorbed interest; human needs and suffering won to their side her constant crusading zeal; human achievement – above all, Australian achievement – was her lifelong enthusiasm" (1980, p. vi). As a supporter of communism who also considered the honour bestowed upon her by the monarchy as one of her greatest moments in life, Gilmore remains a unique figure in Australian history. She showed a strength of mind and a bold approach to politics, society,

and literature that revealed her willingness to stand up for what she believed in, even if those causes were generally unacceptable or considered odd by general society. “From the beginning her commitment to life was total. A rebel born of rebel stock she refused to be imprisoned in the mental and physical strait-jacket Victorian ideals tried incongruously to impose even on women born to the freedom and responsibility inseparable from a pioneering world” (Cusack, 1965, p. 18). Gilmore remains an inspiring figure in Australia’s history, and the extent of letters, poetry and prose that remain well-kept in various institutions, including the Wagga Regional Archives, are a testament to the success of her campaign for historical preservation, and also the legitimate and well-deserved place she is afforded within that history.

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