

Haiku in the Bulletin, 1899

Flannel-flow'rs dancing
To the dawn on the hill-tops...
The Vision of Spring!

Is this the first prize-winning haiku published in an Australian journal or newspaper? It appeared over the name 'R. Crawford' in the Bulletin's famous Red Page on 12 August 1899 along with 13 other haiku and two haiku sequences. Crawford and his fellow poets were responding to an invitation, extended by A. G. Stephens (aka The Bookfellow), to submit 'some haikais, which must have an Australasian reference'. Stephens offered 10s. 6d.—roughly the equivalent of a day's wage—for the best entry received.

Stephens' interest in the haiku form was piqued by a similar competition run in the British journal *Academy and Literature*. Both competitions probably stemmed from the publication in England of W. G. Aston's *History of Japanese Literature*.

Who responded to The Bookfellow's invitation? With his usual flourish, Stephens writes: 'the lists were filled with competitors for the haikai prize—knights and dames; but none showed remarkable prowess'. Stephens had explained to his readers that haiku consisted of 'three unrhymed lines of five, seven and five syllables'. He provided three examples that had been published in the English competition and (probably quoting the *Academy*) said that the haiku's style is 'light and fresh, a swift, fugitive impression more often than not ending with a surprise'. (Bulletin, 8 July 1899)

But Stephens was disappointed with the quality of entries. 'Some attempts too closely imitated the models; others were poetical, but unmelodious; a third class were melodious and unpoetical. It does not seem clear that the form is well suited to English ... But they say the haikai is residuum of a long series of experiments; and genius could no doubt do wonders with it. Local talent has only produced tiny portents'. (Bulletin, 12 August 1899) Despite some misgivings, Stephens awarded the prize money to Crawford's 'Flannel-flow'rs' entry, declaring: 'his third line could be intensified'.

'R. Crawford' was Robert Crawford, a Sydney-born poet educated at The King's School and The University of Sydney. Crawford included his 'Flannel-flow'rs' haiku in his first volume of poetry, *Lyric Moods: Various Verses* (1904) and in the expanded collection *Lyric Moods* (1909). In 1921 he published *Leafy Bliss*, a collection he revised and enlarged in 1924. Again, his prize-winning haiku is included—but with a change to the first line. Crawford discarded the dancing

flannel flowers from his Bulletin entry and changed the first five syllables to read: 'Daffodils dancing'.

Stephens' required 'Australasian reference' had disappeared and what is possibly the first Australian haiku lost its distinctive Antipodean note.

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July 2008