

SINGABOUT

MARCH 2021

1919

While looking at various items related to the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918/19 I came across an interesting poem about a strike. The strike referred to was the 1919 Seamen's Union Strike, about which solidarity.net.au says the following:

The biggest strike of 1919 was the Seamen's Union strike between May and August. While pay and conditions were central to the strike, it was also a strike directly concerned with the risk that influenza posed to seafarers.

The poem refers to Mr Millen who was Edward Millen, Minister for Repatriation and Leader of the Government in the Senate. Millen, with Acting Prime Minister W. A. Watt, brought about the end of the strike while Prime Minister Billy Hughes was overseas.

The poem also refers to Tom Walsh who was born in Ireland in 1871 and, as general secretary of the Seamen's Union, organised the 1919 strike for which he served three months in gaol.

Locking up Walsh didn't stop the strike but it did eventually end, in some places sooner than others, with the Union getting some of the conditions they were seeking met. Accommodation on the ships was somewhat improved, they got a pay rise and some better conditions regarding illness.

Untitled Poem

The strike is off, the strike is on;
The strike is going, the strike is gone,
And back to work will the seamen go
(At least they say that it will be so),
And Mr. Millen says he dunno
Whether they won't or whether they will,
For the strike is over, and going still.

The steam is up and the fires are out,
And no one knows what it's all about.
The cause of Liberty cannot fail.
Whilst brave Tom Walsh is secure in gaol.
And Millen waits for the Sydney mail,
And all Australia's murmuring, "Wow!"
I wonder whether they're striking now.

The seamen whisper, with secret lips
"Do they really mean us to man the ships?
Do we still keep on with the funny old strike.
Or work or idle as we may like.
Or back to yacker full promptly hike?"
And half their officers answer "Yea."
But the other half is hollering "Nay."

And the ships lie idle, with rusting screws,
While Millen radios out to Hughes,
"We've a nice little strike on our hands to-day;
Shall we keep it, Bill, 'till you come this way?
Whatever you like! It's for you to say."
And who knows whether to weep or scoff,
At a strike that's on and is also off.

Published in the *Advocate*, Burnie, Tas, 27 Aug 1919, p4.
Retrieved from Trove: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>

Post war patriotism was also prominent in 1919. There was quite an outcry when an anti-war poem was published in *Labour Call* resulting in public apologies and a change of management of the publication. Poems like the following were better received:

A Poem.

(Dedicated to Lieut.-General Sir W. R. Birdwood).

Who was the man who led his men
In the charge at the Dardanelles?
And proved his able leadership,
As history now tells.

The man who spoke in a voice so calm,
As he dashed across the sand,
Out of "Dead Man's Gully"
And into "No Man's Land."

The first to climb the parapet—
His sword he grasped in his right hand
"Come on !" he said, and high and clear
Rang out the words of that command.

And who was the man who urged his
men,
When footsore, weary, tired, and lame,
And never once was known to shirk ?
Ah! shirking wasn't Birdwood's game.

He never gave a thought to rank :
He fought with privates side by side.
And how those soldiers honored him—
For him they would have gladly died.

War Lords then thought the scheme no
good
Trying to beat the crafty Turk,
So Birdwood must evacuate' .
And try his hand at other work.

But he'd been out there long enough
To give old Fritz a nasty smack,
And every soldier in the Force .
Said, "He is the soul of Anzac,"

And then again when out in France,
He led the way 'gainst fearful odds.
The battle line he formed stood there
Unbent and firm as iron rods.

He was the man when leaving France
Those soldiers carried shoulder high—
Yes, carried like some mighty King
As wild cheers fairly rent the sky.

He smiled at them—he tried to speak
But failed—the men to him were dear,
And from his eye, before the throng,
He wiped away a silent tear.

They cheered again, he waved his hand,
The car moved off, and he was gone.
The soldiers stood with bowed down
heads
And looked a picture most forlorn.

They had loved him —how they loved
him !
And their hearts all throbbed with pain,
With their parting scarcely over,
They longed to meet him once again.

He was just a British General,
But I think those soldiers knew
That the heart that beat 'neath that khaki
coat
Was true—true—true.

Vera Wallace.
Lemana Junction.

Published in the *Circular Head Chronicle* (Stanley, Tas.), 12 Nov 1919, P3
Retrieved from Trove: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>

The final selection are a couple of much more light hearted items published in the *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, 24 Jan 1919, P2 These were also found on Trove.

The first is a poem translated from Chinese and the second is a tale of a city girl's encounter with rural life. No authors given.

A CHINESE POEM

Families when a child is born
Want it to be intelligent.
I, through intelligence
Having wrecked my whole life,
Only hope the baby will prove
Ignorant and stupid.
Then he will crown a tranquil life
By becoming a Cabinet Minister.

— 'A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems.' Translated by Arthur Waley.

A simple maid from the city,
engaged to a farmer bold,
went down to pay him a visit
on the old farm, I've been told.

She saw him place a door knob
right under a trusting hen,
and when she had realised what he had done,
these words she said right then:

"I'm only a girl from the city,
my age is just seventeen,
and let me tell you, mister,
that's the wickedest thing I've seen!

Take back your engagement ring,
you cruellest of men!
For what chance has a chicken
with a man who can fool a hen?