

# THE HEART AND SOUL OF AUSTRALIA

**David Campbell**

There's a spirit in the outback that's a challenge to define  
when a poet tries to find the words he needs,  
and tradition prompts the pattern of a metred, rhyming line  
as a modern critic, disappointed, pleads:  
"Oh no, please, not Henry Lawson, CJ Dennis and the rest,  
like 'The Banjo' and that Snowy River ride,  
with those endless golden sunsets in the deserts way out west,  
and explorers who so tragically died."

But this seems a situation where that challenge should be met,  
for that history of verse can't be ignored  
as it's given us those stories that we never should forget,  
and I reckon that it still can strike a chord,  
so let's take a journey inland, well away from Queensland's coast,  
to 'The Curry' in the land of Burke and Wills,  
where a township built on copper is now very proud to boast  
of the need that one amenity fulfils.

If you want to find a symbol of Australia's heart and soul,  
it's the flying doctor service that supplies  
so much aid to far-flung outposts as it plays a vital role  
in protecting those who'd have to, otherwise,  
spend a day or more on travel for the healthcare they require  
when emergencies have caught them unprepared,  
so the service can be something that will guide us and inspire  
further thinking about stewardship that's shared.

Like respecting Mother Nature, as we're heading down the path  
of a climate that keeps turning to extremes,  
so we face a world in danger, with a tragic aftermath  
that will mean the end of all our hopes and dreams  
when the food bowls of the nation are just arid, wind-blown sand,  
and the rivers merely latticeworks of mud  
as a tribute to our failure to take heed and understand  
that our legacy could be inscribed in blood.

Leaving nothing in a story spanning sixty thousand years,  
from the early days when settlement began  
with the very first arrivals, through the convict pioneers,  
to the present day, and evidence that man  
is destroying vast resources that are needed to survive  
as pollution spreads its poison through the air,  
and so many species suffer as they fight to stay alive  
in a future that seems destined for despair.

So the welfare of the planet is our principal concern  
as the warning signs get clearer by the day,  
but we still have many lessons that remain for us to learn  
if we want to keep catastrophe at bay,  
and the spirit that we're seeking can be found in all that drives  
the compassion of the flying doctor crews  
in the twenty-four hour service that has saved so many lives,  
dedication that so rarely makes the news.

And those fundamental lessons have to come, in part, from those  
well attuned to all the rhythms of the earth,  
our indigenous first peoples who have known the highs and lows  
of the seasons since the moment of their birth,  
for millennia have taught them how to work with nature's laws,  
how to take just what they need and nothing more,  
a philosophy essential as an urgent global cause  
to avoid a vast environmental war.

But the first step to be taken is a transformation here,  
recognition of so much that's been concealed  
by the steady hum of progress as old cultures disappear,  
leaving wounds that time has certainly not healed,  
the result of crimes committed not so very long ago  
as the white man colonised Australia's shores,  
a disruption that continues, as the headlines often show,  
in a travesty that closes many doors.

It's respect that's so important if we want to change our ways,  
for the planet in its current threatened state,  
but we also have to value the ancestral fires that blaze  
like a beacon with the dreamers who relate  
what's existed through the ages, what is now, and yet to come,  
in the hope that through the years that lie ahead  
true equality will flourish when we're marching to a drum  
that ensures mankind is healthy, clothed, and fed.

So let's follow the example that the flying doctor sets  
as a symbol of what selflessness achieves  
through a caring hand extended, without rancour or regrets,  
an acknowledgement that "service" interweaves  
understanding and commitment to a shared environment  
that depends upon us all to play our part  
in a fragile ecosystem where the curse of discontent  
can so easily destroy a nation's heart.