

**'ALICE WITH EYES A'SHINE'**  
**SEEDLINGS OF AN IRISH-AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD**  
**The story of Alice Guerin Crist - 1876-1941**

*Dimity Dornan AM*

One of my earliest memories is of visits to Toowoomba. My childish senses were impressed with air so cold it made my cheeks scald pink, camphorlaurel leaves crunchy underfoot or scented on the tree, delicate poppies glowing in a garden bed of rich soil, and on the wall of my grandfather's house, a picture of a mysterious lady.

The lady looked out of her frame and her eyes looked into mine. They were dark eyes, pansy-soft, and half closed as if she was imagining something delightful while the tiresome photographer manipulated his equipment. She looked special in her fur coat, and she had a fresh rose pinned on her shoulder. Beside her, on the wall were two framed silver and gold medals on faded coloured ribbons.

I remember standing in the spacious living room where the picture hung, wondering why the room was so big, and the dining table so long, and asking who the lady was. Imagine my delight at finding the mysterious lady actually belonged to me, and was my own grandmother!

Fifty years later, *Alice With Eyes A'Shine* was born out of my child-like pride and curiosity, and later the need to investigate myself through the secrets behind those mysterious eyes.

My need to search for Alice started very early in my life when, at 7 years old, I was given a volume of her poems, intriguingly entitled *When Rody Came To Ironbark*. It soon became apparent to me that my mysterious lady was a well-known writer.

It was only as an adult that I learned of the extent of her talent as I delved into the contents of Alice's own tin trunk, stuffed full of her works, both published and unpublished, and all lovingly saved as if she knew someone would want to know her at a later date.

The seeds of her formation were sown on Irish soil, in County Clare West of Fanny O'Dea's, a local inn that was used as a landmark in 1876. Alice's father, Patrick was a feisty school teacher with classical training and a propensity to align himself secretly with the Land League. As school teachers were not allowed to have political leanings, this affiliation initiated his hasty exit from Ireland with his wife, Winifred, "a delicate little lady of the old school", as well as two year old Alice and her baby sister Nancy.

Patrick Guerin was to be among the vanguard of Queensland's earliest teachers, and was posted to Tent Hill, outside of Gatton, to a tiny bush school. Here, Alice followed her father's lead in becoming whole-heartedly enamoured of her life in the new land, unlike her mother, who clung to the old ways. Winifred lost her first-born son just a few months after arriving, and found it hard to make friends among the rough and ready characters who peopled their colonial life.

However, her eldest daughter learned to revere the early pioneers as well as the Irish heroes her father read about to her. Alice stored up all the details of her life in what she was to later call her "patch-work rag-bag of a mind" and later recalled them in her writings. Large local corroborees of the fine, strong aborigines living in the area were to influence her positively, and the birth of a new baby brother at the bush schoolmaster's house, where the cracks in the walls were an unhealthy two inches wide, caused much joy and anxiety for the young family.

In 1880, Patrick was transferred to Cleveland, to a school on the spit between North Street and Shore Street, with Frances Bigge's Grand View Hotel on one side and St Paul's Anglican church on the other. Behind the school, on the beach was an aboriginal camp, where Winifred and her daughter were appalled to see the ravages of the twin white man curses, drink and disease, much in evidence. Winifred was greatly in sympathy with them, and showed many kindnesses which Alice remembered.

Alice started her formal schooling here, and her father encouraged her to use her already well developed writing skills to record life as she saw it, a habit that was to last a lifetime. For the first time in Australia she was able to attend Catholic services with her family and start her music training.

When she was seven years of age the family was posted to Coomera, and the school at this river settlement posed new challenges for Patrick. His pupils, mostly the offspring of rough timbergetters, attended irregularly and their presence at school was further determined by the status of the river. Alice became a pupil-teacher at an early age in order to assist her father to keep the school grades up at a time of repeated floods and hardship. Writing now became a serious pleasure, as schoolwork and teaching filled her days. At 11 years she wrote and published *Afterglow*, a poem wise beyond her years.

### *Afterglow*

A magic wrought of dying dreams,  
A wizard light that creeps and glows,  
Painting grey hills and sluggish streams  
In tints of gold and rose:

Staining with fire the cherry-snow,  
Lighting our hearts with sudden flame,  
As if the love of long ago,  
Back from its ashes came.

Rose-flushed and radiant everything!  
And joy and hope are born anew;  
Even the darting swallow's wing  
Has caught its glowing hue.

Ah! swift it dies from hill and plain...  
Be wise, dear heart, and let me go;  
Not Love that lit our hearts again -  
Only its afterglow!

She became famous as a writer while still in her teens, often appearing on the same page of the Bulletin as her mentor and pen-friend, Mary Gilmore. However Patrick's classical bent and education methods proved too revolutionary for the local people, and he was removed from his post and the family moved to Douglas in the Crow's Nest area. This was the start of a life-time association with the Darling Downs for Alice.

Life was hard after the devastation of flood and fire, and the economy was poor. Alice's wage as a pupil-teacher was cut, as was that of her two younger pupil-teacher brothers, and teachers were forced to sell off school equipment after school to make ends meet. Alice knew that it was time to stand on her own feet and applied for her teacher's certificate, subsequently being transferred to the Blackall Range and then West Haldon, again in the Gatton area. Following a pivotal point in her teaching career, she returned home and married Joseph Christ, a self-educated and clever German settler who was the type of man that could "turn his hand to anything". Alice had always told her family that the poem, *Himself* had special significance for them both.

## *Himself*

Last night, when I was listenin'  
Alone, to wind and rain,  
He took the chair beside me,  
Himself - come home again.

His kind blue eyes were smilin'  
Beneath his thatch of grey,  
He laid his hand on my hand,  
The ould sweetheartin' way.

I pressed my cheek upon it,  
Remembering bitterly  
The times he faced his daily toil  
Without one smile from me.

And yet, his meals were always good,  
His clothes well kept and clean,  
The neighbours, sure, will tell you,  
The splendid wife I've been.

But in Life's stress and struggle,  
We somehow, grew apart,  
You know these Irish mothers,  
'Tis "the childer" has their heart.

And he grew grim, and close-lipped,  
And harder, day by day,  
Poor man - too tired for laughter,  
Too worried to be gay.

But - how his care enclosed us,  
For all he was so grim,  
The very rafters of our home  
Were cut and laid by him.

And I, that might have cheered him,  
The bitter words I said,  
Oh! God, that we remember,  
Only when they are dead.

But now - my arms were round him,  
The room seemed full of flowers,  
And Youth came back and sunshine,  
That glorious time was ours.

The firelight flamed and flickered,  
The embers fell apart,  
I woke to empty silence,  
With sorrow at my heart.

The wild winds brought the morning,  
The dawn was red and chill,  
And Himself was lyin' sleepin'  
In the graveyard on the hill!

Alice reared her three daughters, Dorothy (later Sr M Julian of the Sisters of Mercy), Billie (later Winifred Childs) and Hazel (later Sr Brendan of the Daughters of Charity).

When Alice was 37 years old, well knowing the educational restrictions of a bush school, she moved the family to Toowoomba for the sake of the girl's schooling. My father Dick and his brother Terry were born. My father contracted polio at age two, but thanks to the work of Sr Kenny, he recovered after some years. With the children at school, Alice resumed her writing career at age 40. Among her first works were tributes to the gallant men fighting for Australia in World War 1, including her favourite youngest brother Felician, who was later killed in action in France.

This event was to trigger a life-long dread of war and an annual series of Anzac Day poems published in the Toowoomba Chronicle for many years to come. Jo and Alice legally changed their family name to Crist at this time to avoid the obvious comments and because of anti-German feeling current in Australia.

Six years later, Alice found her literary niche, a contract with the *Catholic Advocate* in Brisbane. With the blessing of her husband, she wrote profusely, and her subjects were life and events in South-East Queensland at the turn of the century. In 1927 she turned out ninety-five poems, short stories and serial instalments, a rate of production that was to ease only a little in the next 12 years. The editor chose them particularly for their faithful reproduction of life and also for their Irish-Catholic themes.

Two major factors contributed to her success, the first being her use of Irish-Australian themes at a time when the motor car and cinema were causing a decline in the Irish Catholic parishioners at church. Alice helped to keep the faithful and not so faithful mindful of their religious roots. Alice has been named by prominent historian, Patrick O'Farrel, as the "Queensland counterpart of Fr John O'Brien", of *Around the Boree Log* fame.

The second reason for her success as a writer is her vivid description of bush characters at a time when Australians romanticized the bush life, This was because two thirds of the population lived in cities and, at the onset of the depression in 1893, people turned to idealize and draw comfort from the 'simpler life'.

Dame Mary Gilmore once described Alice as “Queensland’s singer of graceful songs”. Her critics professed that she was able to create in the written word the simplicity, magic and wonder of childhood, and the range of her inspiration was as broad as her life experiences. She set herself among the forerunners of feminism by fulfilling her literary ambitions at a time when higher education for women was considered an evil, let alone the pursuing of a career being an option for a married woman.

I found in Alice’s works, not only a human woman with faults as well as talents and gifts; but also a sense of security and peace in an era of ever-changing technology. However I feel that Alice, with her love of learning, would have approved of the information age. Most particularly I feel she would have approved of my life work of teaching children who are deaf and hearing-impaired to speak.

Alice Guerin Crist’s legacy can be found not only in her works - especially those for children - but in the work of her family, particularly Dorothy, who became the founding principal of Macauley College (later the Australian Catholic University). Hazel became the first European woman to be honoured by being preceded to her grave by the aboriginal flag because of her work with mothers and babies on aboriginal settlements. Both Alice and her mother would have been proud.

Finally I would like to tell the story of how Alice’s biography came to be named *Alice With Eyes A’Shine*. I was sitting in a bunker during a bomb scare at the Jordan-Israeli border with my husband, Peter, some years back. We were on a tour of the Middle East, following ‘in the footsteps of the prophets’.



As I kept my head down and tried to appreciate where I was, the beauty of the blue Star of David Flag, hanging against the glaring blue sky of the turbulent land that is Israel, moved me. I thought about seeing, for the first time, the land where my father fought in during WW11. I remembered how his mother, Alice had hated war and the fact that she died before he returned home.

I tried to pass the time by writing down the words of a poem she had written to him on receiving one of his letters fresh from the battle. It is a \*poem which reveals much of my fey little grandmother, and when I came to write down the last line, I knew that Alice's works would live again.

*\* This poem is printed on the following page*

## ***A Letter From Palestine***

*A letter from "The East" it came today,  
And all the house is lightened of its gloom:  
A sun-browned desert wind through every room  
Eddies, and brings strange scents of old bazaare;  
Of orange-groves beneath the dreaming stars  
O'er far Jerusalem. Through these ordered rooms  
Where poppies glow and pale narcissi blooms  
Nod in tall vases, sings the desert breeze  
Telling of brown battalions overseas.  
Khaki-clad soldiers, singing as they go  
Along the road to Gaza, and we know  
The very breath of freedom's in the air  
With their gay boast, "Australia will be there"  
Mateship and courage, loyalty and truth  
The very essence of Australian youth!  
We have no fears! serene in faith we pray  
For those dear gallant lads so far away.  
**AND ONE SMALL WOMAN WALKS  
WITH EYES A-SHINE  
BECAUSE A LETTER CAME - FROM PALESTINE!***