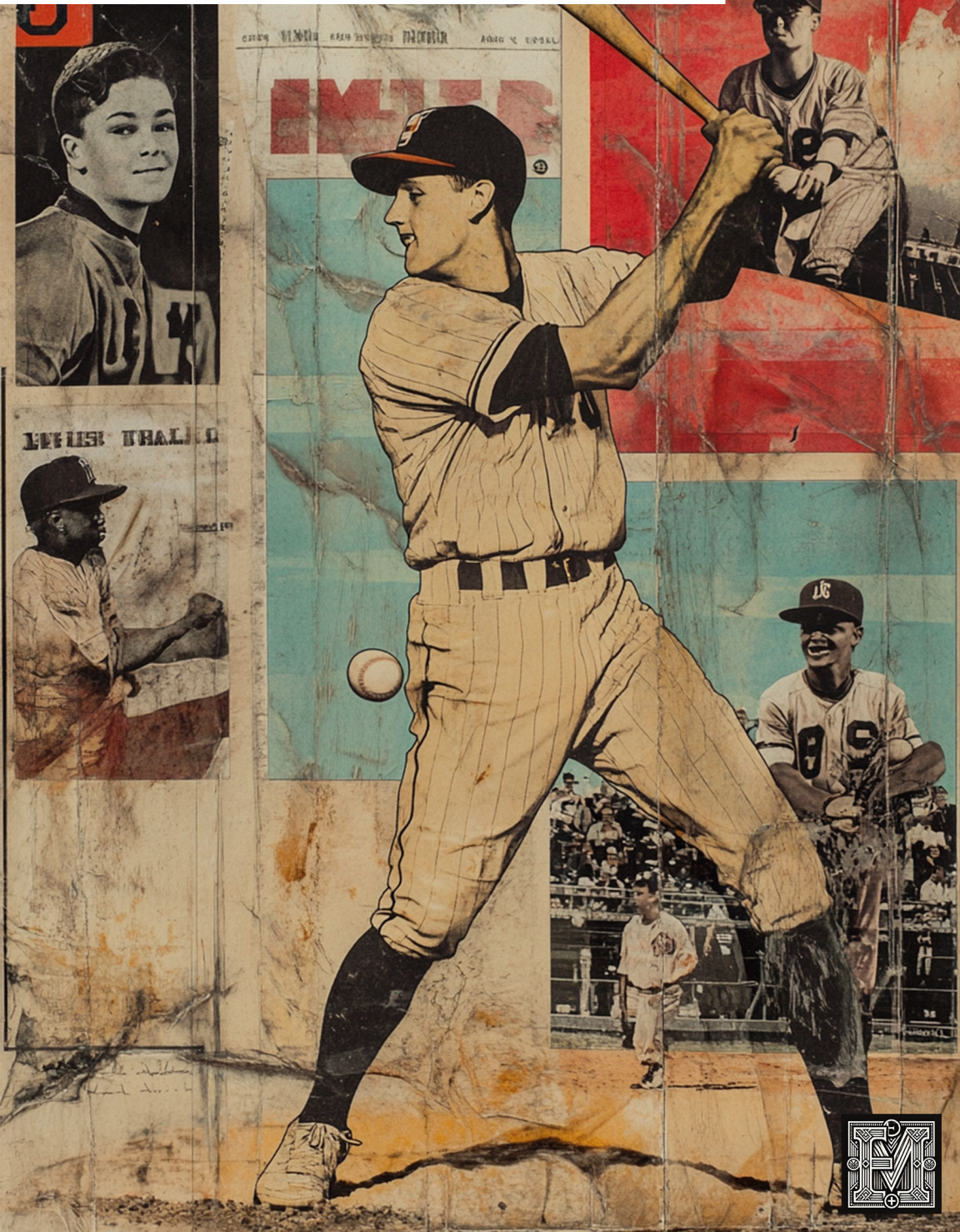


# Harry MacPherson

## Selected Poems



# Harry MacPherson

September 24, 1892 [Topeka, Kansas] –  
January 9, 1968 [Los Angeles, California]

MacPherson was born in Kansas, where he worked as the comic editor of the *Wichita Eagle*. Some of his education occurred in Northern California. He married Juanita Weber in 1913 in Salt Lake City, Utah. He moved to San Diego around 1920 and worked as the automobile editor of the *San Diego Sun*. He published his only book of poems, *Squared Circle*, in 1921, and published other poems (in some cases car-themed) in *Goodwin's Weekly*. He was living in Pasadena by 1928, and stayed in the Los Angeles area until his death. He continued to publish light poems in the Los Angeles papers at least through the 20s.

*Squared Circles*. San Diego: San Diego Sun, 1921.

# Squared Circles

Some are flat—nor high nor low—  
    No heights, no depths, no Heav'n, no hell;  
With dull, plain apathy they go  
    On cloddy level, and think it well;  
Black death, white life they do not know!  
    What tale can gray *existence* tell?

## I

Where lilacs drip with vernal rain  
And Summer gilds the emerald grain,  
Where Autumn cracks vermillion leaves  
And Winter fairy-pattern weaves—  
Embroidered chill on the window-glass—  
Where I was a lad and she a lass,  
Back to my fond home-land I strayed,  
Back to the real game, fairly played,  
Where simplicity's tyro-gaze  
Stares with wonder at novel ways.

## II

Train-trekking toward the gates of dawn  
How suddenly sea and hills were gone;  
How soon on undulating plains  
Warm day kissed lips of ardent grains.  
I sped ahead to a spot of charm,  
Trivial town beside our farm,  
Remembering well despite the years—  
Mad, interlying, stirring years  
So choked by laughter edged with tears—  
How folks on Saturdays would gather  
To gossip of the crops and weather.

## III

Sure knots before the dry-goods store  
Would swap the news and rustic lore:

That planting beets or carrot crops  
In moonlight made 'em go to tops;  
How measles raged down by the "crick"—  
The whole blamed neighborhood wassick;  
How ev'ry feller in the Spring  
Should take a tonic, banishing  
With sulphur and molasses all  
The ails that piled up since the Fall.

#### IV

I idled on. The train raced through  
A hundred towns, a city or two.  
Familiar signs within my range  
Of hungry vision seemed so strange.  
New depots here and paved streets there,  
Unshaded, regular and square.  
Till finally the trainman bawled  
My boyhood village. As he called  
The name in accents coarsely clear,  
With alien sound it stung my ear.

#### V

How changed are manhood-conjured scenes  
When mem'ry upon childhood leans!  
Here a building, remembered well,  
That recognized and spoke. "Do tell!"  
It shrilled in quaint, familiar tone,  
"Where have you been and how you've grown!"  
Haggard and wrinkled in roof and wall  
My friend had shrunk, who once was tall;  
Dwarfed by the curse of my heightened gaze.  
Dulled by the splendor of newer ways.  
Dimmed by the shadow of structures bold  
Flaunting their youth to the warped and old.

#### VI

And wagon tracks? Long since ail rolled,

Straightened and paved—how queerly cold  
The same streets seemed. No curve the eye  
Relieved. And there came crashing by—  
Stunning my soul—well known machines.  
But unfamiliar in these scenes;  
This town where beauty used to glow—  
This town I knew, but didn't know.  
I spied the marshal from afar.  
Then closer. "Chief" adorned his star!

## VII

The folks I'd known spoke language quaint.  
Oft interspersed with "fetch" or "ain't."  
"I calculate" would slip from tongue  
As fluently as an old song sung.  
What was this talk, this conversation  
These persons made? Some hesitation—  
It seemed—was lurking on each lip  
As though they ever feared to slip  
Back down to phrases, early-learned,  
And now by fresh-paint culture spurned.

## VIII

I met Jack Price. He as a boy  
Had known no luxury but joy.  
His parents (luck is often murky)  
Were well-nigh poor as old Job's turkey;  
Jack—ever an ambitious cub—  
Invited me to his Country Club.  
Youth-chum talking with coin-hard eyes  
And voice that sought to patronize.  
To view success makes one inspired—  
But what a broad "a" he'd acquired!

## IX

"And where," I asked, "is Clinton Hall,  
That kid whose father owned most all

The real estate in town?" Price said:  
"Perhaps you know, the old man's dead;  
Left all his stuff to Clint and he  
Had a wild, four-year spending spree—  
He doesn't count now, really poor;  
Is selling shoes in Newman's store."  
High-born can fall, low-born rise.  
No sympathy in Price's eyes.

X

Down by the railroad where I'd played  
And fought in Humboldt's lot, they'd made  
A regulated playground there,  
Fretted and fenced with grownup care;  
My swimming hole in the careless stream  
That used to echo with bare-boy scream,  
Improved by a store-sold diving chutes  
For nice, clean boys in bathing suits.  
Rough woods, just made for walnut larks,  
Were *beautified*—one of the city parks.

XI

Out on the slopeside, weather swept,  
Where tired Old-timers softly slept,  
I went. The graveyard was too bright  
With tended flowers to left and right  
All orderly. A dead breeze moaned  
And slid by hard graves freshly stoned;  
Expensive monuments replaced  
Those etched by grief, by teardrops traced.  
Gay gilded letters crowned the gate;  
"Memorial Park"—our graveyard's fate.

XII

Remember how the Sunday swains  
In winter snows or springtime rains  
Or other seasons went to wait

For church-girls just outside the gate?  
When parsons damned in words immortal,  
Shaken, they faltered at the portal.  
But in Cathedral, rich and fine,  
Unmellowed yet by time or vine.  
Unhallowed fearless gather there—  
Smug lectures sooth, they never scare.

XIII

Drawn to a measure, taped and ruled  
The people seemed all virtue-schooled  
With regulations writ for curbing  
Irregularities disturbing.  
Of old, by keen revivals prod,  
They shouted sinners back to God,  
And if they'd fallen far from grace  
How joy-lit was each Heavened face!  
But sons of these, year in, year out.  
Curse sin, but ne'er for sinners shout.

XIV

Who knows but humans can become  
By long residing, like their home,  
And in a palace, stately, fair,  
Absorb a grand and gracious air;  
Or where the sharp peaks pierce the blue  
And wet seas thicken nightly dew,  
The people go from high to low  
And up to high—all to and fro.  
After pain, pleasure's vast—  
We're happiest when sorrow's past.

XV

A fallen woman plucked from fire  
Has super-virtue, none is higher.  
Coarse granite is the statue base,  
So staunch that time cannot efface

The higher marble, smoothly fine  
In graceful texture, slender line.  
Crudities in romantic tale  
But limn the lovely lyrics frail.  
Nor pure nor beautiful nor strong  
Are middle morals, stone or song.

#### XVI

Land of my Dreams—I left it there,  
Vibrationless as the pre-storm air,  
Curbing and cramping all emotion,  
Chill as an ice-breath on the ocean;  
Specified, squared, surveyed and sure.  
Certified, warranted right and pure.  
Back I hurried to rest my eyes  
On red-flecked sea when dim day dies,  
Mystery-masts in the harbors old,  
Magical mountains of unfound gold;

#### XVII

Shifting mists and the restless breeze  
Pungent with odor of other seas,  
Missions where age-green ivy sighs  
And laughter and love in friendly eyes;  
Loveliness smiles—no one suspects her;  
Sin reforms—and none rejects her;  
Only Dullness suffers pain,  
Scorned—she's shallow, flat and plain;  
Hers small credit for blameless station.  
Ugliness never fights temptation.

#### XVIII

North or south or east or west,  
I'll picture my home as I loved it best,  
Youthful and arrogant, raw and free,  
Flayed by winds like the storms at sea,  
Balmed by peace of the purple sage—

Erring folks in a humaner age;  
People with frailties, not too wise,  
Novelty in each fresh sunrise;  
White hearts, black hearts, hearts of gold;  
Warm-blooded, hot-blooded—never cold!

# Schoolgirls

Heaviest tomes they lightly swing  
Off to school with their chattering,  
Ah, but it makes the heartstrings sing  
    Just at the carefree sight!  
Youthful light in their bright, young eyes,  
Eyes that are neither too dull nor wise.  
Healthfully seeking each new surprise—  
    Oh for a pen to write!

Silks and satins and bold brocades  
Heightening, brightening worldlier maids;  
Theirs the necessity for such aids—  
    Glorious glamors of grace.  
Can they compare with the high-school lass,  
Bloused in simplicity's primer class  
Who speeds our hearts as we see her pass  
    With eager and girlish face?

Learning their lessons of love and life,  
Yet untouched by the storms and strife  
That all in an elderly world are rife,  
    Tingeing our souls with gray;  
Pray that they never may feel defeat,  
Let them laugh while their laughter's sweet—  
God keep the song in their dancing feet,  
    Just as it is today.

# Parsnips

Through all the weary, dreary years  
I've eaten in this vale of tears—  
With buttered corn upon my ears—  
    There's something that has vexed me;  
There's been a question in my mind,  
(I really have one, of a kind)  
It's popped up ev'ry time I've dined—  
    It often has perplexed me.

On tables here and tables there.  
On tables round and tables square.  
At home, hotel or boarding fare,  
    Each time they came I shook 'em;  
I never could devour the weed,  
(Or is it fruit?) and I've agreed  
With others that there was no need  
    For wasting time to cook 'em.

I've seen them camouflaged in creams,  
I've seen them steamed in steamer steams,  
But never in my weirdest dreams  
    Have I essayed to choose them;  
Or oiled or boiled or stewed or fried  
Have never even seen them tried  
By diners thin, or fat folks wide—  
    Nobody seems to use them.

But now a friend says they are fine  
If brewed into a parsnip wine—  
He says it makes a drink divine,  
    With lots of kick, illegal;  
The Volstead Law has taught us much.  
We're brewing now to beat the Dutch,  
But of all knowledge thus and such.  
    This cops the Golden Eagle!

If parsnips can be taken from  
The menu cards and made to hum  
In gala wine—that's going some!  
    I'll cheer them like a Deuce-Full;  
I know the things are not a food,  
Nor medicine, I've understood  
And if they'll make a drink that's good  
    (And *strong*) they may be useful.

# Soft Shackles

I worked today!

And yesterday and yesterdays before,  
I worked—  
Doing the same dull, tiring tasks,  
O'er and o'er.

Working today  
Old happenings unbidden rushed to me—  
Far places, other friends.  
And I wondered as I pondered  
If they'd greet me with the old-time fervor?  
And dreaming, hated this—  
Endless work!

Vagrantly I idled home  
The truant thoughts tumbling my straying mind.

In a small home a woman waited  
With kisses and a happy story  
Of how the Baby spoke a word,  
Or walked across the floor.

I'll always work!

# Whistling

It seems but yesterday when all so proudly  
    A seven-year-old, my laddie, came to me—  
    “Look, Daddie! I’ve learned to whistle. See?”  
Then pursed his baby lips and bravely, loudly.  
Whistled a little, wavering, lilting tune—  
    “Yankee Doodle” I think it was. “It’s fine!”  
I praised his wonder-feat. But all too soon  
    He stretched into a youth, this boy o’ mine.

I used to listen for him late at night  
    When he’d been out to high school dances, and  
    He used to whistle home some song the band  
Had played, and step off quick and right;  
He’d click his heels so surely on the walk  
    I’d always know ’twas he. and smile.  
Then how I used to love his boy-man talk.  
    Life for him contained a lot worth while.

Then the war came. He wasn’t old enough  
    To go but every day around the place  
    He’d whistle bugle calls and in his face  
The great desire shone—’twas pretty tough  
When finally he said he couldn’t bear  
    To stay at home. But I let him go—  
Mighty proud of the youngster, too. but there  
    Was a soul-ache—my only kid you know.

I used to get his letters—funny stuff  
    He’d write about the “cooties” and the mud;  
    And never a word of bayonets or blood  
Or homesickness—but I knew him well enough  
To feel he’d face machine-guns with a smile  
    And whistle with that little boyish nod.  
His letters stopped. Then for an aching while  
    We didn’t know—and then we learned. Oh God!

Last night I lay and listened to the noise  
    That drifted in: laughter—roar of cars—  
    Nightbirds chattering underneath the stars—  
Music of the night; the city's voice.  
And then came ringing, singing from out there  
    The click of heels time-stepping a refrain  
Some youngster whistling a patriotic air.  
    My heart leaped—stopped! Then choked me with the pain.

# Shopping

In the mottled market-place a blur of eager faces,  
Anxious ringers flinging forth the toil-won gold;  
Jade and myrrh and calico and cocoanuts and laces—  
What a luring store of things the counters hold.

Women flushed with fineries—silk and satin wrappings;  
Women with their shabby gowns and faces faded gray,  
Hurrying and worrying, a-scramble for the trappings,  
Flaming with the fever of an age-old Play.

Riches men have died for arrayed in careless fashion—  
Things that must have crawled across the ruthless sands;  
Cargoes that have braved the ocean's wildest, reckless passion,  
Here to feel the heedlessness of hungry hands.









































































































































































