

Lament for Elizabeth

Elizabeth White Robertson, d. 14th January 1847, Norfolk Island, age 24

Elizabeth darling, we shed tears in leaving
 Your mortal remains in this desolate isle
 Yet purely for us was the course of your grieving
 Your loved ones now yearning your sweet vanished smile

Your thin wasted frame wrecked by blighting consumption
 Is stilled from the rack of its torment for breath
 Mortality-sentence accepting with unction
 As convicts, condemned, face the grace of their death

From calcinate crags of this rock unforgiving
 This bleakest of prisons in vastness of sea
 Our sails bear away from the tale of your living
 Who dying, have set sail at last and are free

Tis echo of dread in the name Norfolk Island
 Malignant descendant of Botany Bay
 Each towering pine, sombre gully and highland
 Bear witness to crime in each desperate day

For here were the trials, the bloody rebellion
 The arrogant pebble men: 'Flog, and be damned!'
 The standover bully, the unquenched rascalion
 The horror of Westwood's red murderous hand

And here the lash whistling, the leg irons' dull ringing
 The clang of the mallets as wretches split stone
 Harsh squeal of the crank mill, the tramp of men bringing
 The wet-quarry rock won by lost sobbing moan

Yet like the new promise of buds in September
 The foam of the surf and its sharp salty smell
 So sweetly this island your name may remember
 In simple folk touched by the life you lived well

Like Mortlock the tutor, the servants yet grieving
 And Barber, unjustly condemned to his fate
 The trustees you treated with kindness, believing
 Their human condition in life's painful state

If Providence choose that your fate be forgotten
 And words on your headstone rough sands should erase
 New children uncursed by this time, yet-begotten,
 May trace in your letters strong truth in each phrase

We leave you the whistle of seabirds a-wheeling
The souging of winds in the up-reaching trees
The swift-flying clouds in blue skies for a ceiling
And round you the unfettered song of the seas

Elizabeth White Robertson died from tuberculosis 14th January 1847, age 24, and was buried at Kingston cemetery, Norfolk Island. Her letters to her sister Fanny are kept in the Dixon Library NSW. They are reprinted as *Elizabeth Robertson's Diary, Norfolk Island 1845* [sic] ed. Morval Hoare 1988