

REPRESENTATIVE POETRY ONLINE

Poet Index	Poem Index	Random	Search
Introduction	Timeline	Calendar	Glossary
	Criticism	Bibliography	
RPO	Canadian Poetry		UTEL

Thomas Pringle (1789-1834)

Afar in the Desert

- 1 Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
2 With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
3 When the sorrows of life the soul o'ercast,
4 And, sick of the Present, I cling to the Past;
5 When the eye is suffused with regretful tears,
6 From the fond recollections of former years;
7 And shadows of things that have long since fled
8 Flit over the brain, like the ghosts of the dead:
9 Bright visions of glory -- that vanish too soon;
10 Day-dreams -- that departed ere manhood's noon;
11 Attachments -- by fate or by falsehood reft;
12 Companions of early days -- lost or left;
13 And my Native Land -- whose magical name
14 Thrills to the heart like electric flame;
15 The home of my childhood; the haunts of my prime;
16 All the passions and scenes of that rapturous time
17 When the feelings were young and the world was new,
18 Like the fresh bowers of Eden unfolding to view;
19 All -- all now forsaken -- forgotten -- foregone!
20 And I -- a lone exile remembered of none --
21 My high aims abandoned, -- my good acts undone, --
22 -- Aweary of all that is under the sun, --
23 With that sadness of heart which no stranger may scan,
24 I fly to the Desert afar from man!
- 25 Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
26 With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
27 When the wild turmoil of this wearisome life,
28 With its scenes of oppression, corruption, and strife --
29 The proud man's frown, and the base man's fear, --
30 The scorner's laugh, and the sufferer's tear --
31 And malice, and meanness, and falsehood, and folly,
32 Dispose me to musing and dark melancholy;
33 When my bosom is full, and my thoughts are high,
34 And my soul is sick with the bondman's sigh --
35 Oh! then there is freedom, and joy, and pride,
36 Afar in the Desert alone to ride!
37 There is rapture to vault on the champing steed,
38 And to bound away with the eagle's speed,
39 With the death-fraught firelock in my hand --
40 The only law of the Desert Land!

41 Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
42 With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
43 Away -- away from the dwellings of men,
44 By the wild deer's haunt, by the buffalo's glen;
45 By valleys remote where the oribi plays,
46 Where the gnu, the gazelle, and the hartèbeest graze,
47 And the kùdù and eland unhunted recline
48 By the skirts of grey forests o'erhung with wild-vine;
49 Where the elephant browses at peace in his wood,
50 And the river-horse gambols unscared in the flood,
51 And the mighty rhinoceros wallows at will
52 In the fen where the wild-ass is drinking his fill.

53 Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
54 With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
55 O'er the brown Karroo, where the bleating cry
56 Of the springbok's fawn sounds plaintively;
57 And the timorous quagga's shrill whistling neigh
58 Is heard by the fountain at twilight grey;
59 Where the zebra wantonly tosses his mane,
60 With wild hoof scouring the desolate plain;
61 And the fleet-footed ostrich over the waste
62 Speeds like a horseman who travels in haste,
63 Hying away to the home of her rest,
64 Where she and her mate have scooped their nest,
65 Far hid from the pitiless plunderer's view
66 In the pathless depths of the parched Karroo.

67 Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
68 With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
69 Away -- away -- in the Wilderness vast,
70 Where the White Man's foot hath never passed,
71 And the quivered Coránna or Bechuán
72 Hath rarely crossed with his roving clan:
73 A region of emptiness, howling and drear,
74 Which Man hath abandoned from famine and fear;
75 Which the snake and the lizard inhabit alone,
76 With the twilight bat from the yawning stone;
77 Where grass, nor herb, nor shrub takes root,
78 Save poisonous thorns that pierce the foot;
79 And the bitter-melon, for food and drink,
80 Is the pilgrim's fare by the salt lake's brink:
81 A region of drought, where no river glides,
82 Nor rippling brook with osiered sides;
83 Where sedgy pool, nor bubbling fount,
84 Nor tree, nor cloud, nor misty mount,
85 Appears, to refresh the aching eye:
86 But the barren earth, and the burning sky,
87 And the black horizon, round and round,
88 Spread -- void of living sight or sound.

89 And here, while the night-winds round me sigh,
90 And the stars burn bright in the midnight sky,
91 As I sit apart by the desert stone,
92 Like Elijah at Horeb's cave alone,
93 'A still small voice' comes through the wild
94 (Like a Father consoling his fretful Child),

95 Which banishes bitterness, wrath, and fear, --
96 Saying -- MAN IS DISTANT, BUT GOD IS NEAR!

Notes

- 1] Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to Pringle on March 20, 1828, that he encountered this poem in Thompson's *Travels* and "was taken so completely possession of [it], that for some days I did little else but read and recite your poem, now to this group and now to that -- and since that time have either written or caused to be written, at least half a dozen copies ... With the omission of about four or at the utmost six lines I do not hesitate to declare it, among the two or three most perfect lyric Poems in our Language" (Earl Leslie Griggs, "Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Pringle," *QBSAL* 6.1 [Sept. 1951]; quoted in *African Poems of Thomas Pringle*, ed. Ernest Pereira and Michael Chapman [Durban: University of Natal Press, 1989]: 79-80). For the different versions of this poem, see George W. Robinson, "Bibliography of Thomas Pringle's 'Afar in the Desert,'" *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 17.1 (1923).
- 2] Bush-boy: Dutch term for native living in the wilderness.
- 29] Perhaps an allusion to Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy in Shakespeare's tragedy of the same name.
- 45] oribi: small dark brown antelope (a Hottentot name).
- 46] gnu: wildebeest, an antelope resembling an ox.
gazelle: " ... the *Reebok*, or any other of the smaller antelopes" (Pringle's note, p. 502).
hartèbeest: an antelope (*Alcephalus caama*; cf. Pringle's note, p. 502).
- 47] kùdù: "*Koodoo*, (*Antilope Strepsiceros*)" (Pringle's note, p. 502).
eland: "(*Antilope Oreas*), called by the Hottentots *Kanna*" (Pringle's note, p. 502).
- 50] river-horse: hippopotamus.
- 55] Karroo: "an arid desert, about three hundred miles in length, by from seventy to eighty in breadth; bounded by the Sneeuwberg and Nieuwveld ridges of mountains on the north, and by the Zwartberg, or Black Mountain ridge, on the south" (Pringle's note, p. 501).
- 56] springbok: "A species of antelope, *Antilope euchore*, abounding in South Africa, characterized by a habit of springing almost directly upwards when excited or disturbed" (OED).
- 57] quagga: "South African equine quadruped (*Equus* or *Hippotigris Quagga*), related to the ass and zebra, but lessfully striped than the latter" (OED), exterminated about 1873. "The cry of the *Quagga* (pronounced *quaha*, or *quacha*) is very different from that of either the horse or ass" (Pringle's note, p. 503).
- 69] Wilderness vast: "The Desert of Kallegghanny or Challahenagh, north of the Orange River, and lying between the countries of the Bechuanas and Damards, is said to be for the most part entirely destitute of water, so that the Bechuanas and Corannas in crossing it are forced to subsist on a species of wild water-melon ... a species of *Coloquintida* ... bitter and pungent to the taste" (Pringle's note, p. 503).
- 71] Coránna: or Bechuán: "The Corannas, Koras, or Koraquas, are a tribe of independent Hottentots, inhabiting the banks of the Gareep, or Great Orange River" (Pringle, 504); the Bechuana are a peaceful native tribe "people inhabiting the country between the Orange and Zambezi rivers in Southern Africa, speaking Tswana (formerly called Sechuana), a Bantu language" (OED).
- 80] salt-lake: "... the water is exhaled, and the dry crystallized salt remains, white as a frozen lake, in the bosom of the dry parched land" (Pringle's note, p. 503).
- 82] osiered: covered with osiers, a type of willow tree (*Salix viminalis*).

92] Elijah at Horeb's cave: a Biblical story told in 1 Kings 19, especially 11-13. Elijah journeyed forty days and nights in the wilderness to reach Horeb, the mount of God, who came and told him to stand on the mountain top. "And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"
