

SINGABOUT

SEPTEMBER 2020

THE FLU

Many comparisons have been made between the current pandemic and those that have gone before, notably the Plague and the Spanish Flu. The latter occurred during the First World War and was spread in part by troop movements. It appears to have originated in North America, where the first cases were diagnosed, though the exact origins are not clear. The name came from there being much more open reporting from Spain as they were neutral in the war and therefore much less interested in keeping casualties a secret.

The first two poems here were written and published while the flu was circulating with a third published after it had passed. The first gives some impressions of the pandemic and the responses to it, while the second is a typically Australian take on having the virus. The final one is an interesting look at reactions after it has passed.

The attitudes and themes in the poems are interesting when compared with views today. Is history repeating itself in some way? I'll let you be the judges...

The Flu

'Tis here, 'tis here, and most severe,
At last it has got through;
What young and old alike do fear,
The dreaded Spanish flu.

It needed no great influence
To reach Australia's shores;
But with its foreign impudence,
It came, and here it scores.

You must be inoculated,
And although it is a task,
Where a crowd is congregated,
You're supposed to wear a mask.

Although doctors seem to differ,
If they're really any good;
Some do recommend our sniffer,
Oil distilled from native wood.

Though in creosote
they've dipped us,
And we're reeking
through and through
With the stink of eucalyptus
Still perhaps we'll catch the flu.

Now you can't go to the pictures,
And you cannot see a play;
And there certainly are strictures,
On the racing men to-day.

They've closed the pubs,
they've closed the schools,
They'll close the churches too;
And children will know
less than fools,
All through the blooming flu.

No merits will there be to get,
And none will be commended;
But kiddies never do regret
The holidays extended.

A parson bold enough to preach
That kissing now should stop;
But some he would hygienics teach,
Think that he's shook on top.

Young gents and flappers
are enraged,
Perhaps they'll leave the Church;
And some who've lately
been engaged
For other haunts may search.

Perhaps they'll go on Sunday
To some breezy mountain top,
Far away from Mrs Grundy,
And where parsons are *de trop*

And then they'll smooze,
and bill and coo,
All day and half the night;
So if perchance they catch the flu,
They'll find that he was right.

Poet's pen name was "Kookaburra".

Published in the Eltham and Whittlesea Shires Advertiser and Diamond Creek Valley Advocate, 21 Feb 1919, p1.

Retrieved from Trove: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>

The Digger and the 'Flu

Before I fell a victim
To the wiles of Spanish "flu";
I'd gathered from the posters,
And certain movies, too,
That when it came to nurses,
You always woke to view
Some peach of dove-like beauty,
Who slipped the pills to you.

I've read the artful fiction
About the angels fair,
Who sat beside your pillow,
And stroked your fevered hair,
And made you kind of careless
How long you lingered there
In the radiant effulgence
Of a lovely baby stare.

That may be true in cases,
The way it is in plays,
But mine was no white lady
Of lilting roundelays;
While I was outed with the "flu",
The nurse, who soothed my pain
Was Private Billy Rogers,
That "fired" on the Herberton train.

Poem by "Anonymous"
Published in the Cairns Post, 3 Jun 1919, p7
Retrieved from Trove: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>

After the 'Flu

I had nine kinds of Spanish 'flu,
with sundry German brands thrown in;
all day I coughed and said, "Ker-choo!"
all night I coughed and sneezed like sin.

The doctor said, as at my side
he mixed up pills to feed my face,
"The wonder is you have not died!
I never saw so bad a case.

I've seen a hundred taken down,
I've seen them, like the ripe grain fall;
a thousand men are sick in town,
but you are sicker than them all.

It is a feather in my cap
that I have pulled you through the strife;
that you still loiter on the map,
and breathe the well-known
breath of life."

The nurse, a lady most refined,
had kindred soothing things to say;
"By jings," she cried, "it strikes me blind
that you are still on earth to-day!

When first I heard you sneeze and choke,
and throw all kinds of fancy fits,
I said, 'Oh, chee, this guy will croak
ere I've a chance to earn two bits!' "

So in my convalescent days,
when doc announced that I was cured,
I longed to go my old-time ways,
and brag of all I had endured.

There is no sense in being ill
unless it gives you an excuse
to talk about the doctor's bill,
and boast of pain to beat the deuce.

And when at last I toiled up-town,
all primed with tales of pain and ache,
my old companions turned me down,
and said my sickness was a fake.

Old Calvin Johnson muttered,
"Shoo! You have your gall
to talk of pain!
A tin-horn ailment like the 'flu.
Your talk is frivolous and vain.

Just wait until you have the gout,
your toe swelled bigger than a brick!
Then you may prance around,
old scout,
and claim that you really
have been sick!"

Said Baldwin, "While you've been
in bed,
pretending that you had disease,
I've been at least three-quarters dead,
with rheumatiz in both my knees!

And when I've borne a hundredweight
of poultices upon my frame,
it makes me tired to have a skate
come up and boost his cheap
'flu game!"

Alas, no matter what I do,
my friends will never let me brag;
in vain I hoped my siege of 'flu would
give a chance to chew the rag.

Another anonymous poem
Published in the Gippsland Times, 20 Jun 1929, p6
Retrieved from Trove: <https://trove.nla.gov.au>