

It's Love, Isn't It?



The Love Poems

Alistair Te Ariki Campbell
and Meg Campbell

Launched by Dr Nelson Wattie
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It's Love, Isn't It: The Love Poems of Alistair Te Ariki Campbell and Meg Campbell
(HeadworX)

For about sixty years Alistair Campbell has been publishing poetry on wide range of topics: from mental illness to joyful good spirits, from pleasure in the world to a sense that the world is not to be trusted, from the solid reality of trees, animals, landscapes and wind to the strangeness of ghosts and spirits, from violence and cannibalism to tenderness and love. For some time now, I have had the habit of turning up whenever I knew he was to read from his verse. For a few years, in front of many different audiences, I heard him read some of his darkest, most disconcerting poems, again and again. The audiences tended to respond with polite respect and admiration. And then one lovely sunny day he read in an outdoor venue, a vineyard in the Wairarapa – and he read poems of love. The audience smiled, they turned to each other appreciating the words and the people around them, and they applauded loudly and enthusiastically. All kinds of poetry have their place – dramatic poems, melancholy poems, fearful poems, dark poems, and humorous poems as well – and Campbell has written them all in his time, but love poems have a place that is special in the hearts of many people, and when he turns to love, the words of Alistair Campbell seem to glow with a special light.

He had been pursuing a successful poetic career for some twenty years when another voice emerged from the Campbell world, the voice of Meg Campbell. Her poems were sometimes troubled and dark as well, and her verses responding to the misery and pain of life in mental hospitals have a quality that is unique in New Zealand literature and unusual in literature anywhere. But, again, it is her love poetry that remains in many readers' minds, and it seems fair to say that of all the many qualities one associates with Meg, the woman and the poet, the outstanding one, the one that gives meaning and value to the others, is love. There are several kinds of love to be found in her poems: sisterly love, motherly and grandmotherly love, love of household pets and other living creatures, her own unique kind of love for her own unique kind of God – but the poems of a woman's love for a man go straight to the hearts of those who read her with sympathy and know how to respond to her love, and return it.

From the very beginnings of poetry in the world, as far as we can trace it back into classical antiquity and beyond that to the world of early civilisations and the societies of hunters and gatherers, love poetry has always been essential to every society. In spite of that, we have a relative paucity of fine love poetry in New Zealand. I can already hear people protesting at that and naming the love poems they especially enjoy, and there have been one or two anthologies of New Zealand love poems as well. But the purity of love poetry does not always accord with the sturdy independence that New Zealanders frequently pride themselves on. Without pursuing this thought too far, I think most will already see where I am heading: the book we are celebrating today would be unusual in any place or time and is unique in New Zealand.

Here we have a collection of poems from two poets of equal stature – I will repeat that: *two poets of equal stature* – celebrating love and, indeed, celebrating their love for each other. Since the death of one of them, Meg, the other, Alistair, has performed a further act of love for the woman he was married to for fifty years. He has taken some of her poems and some of his own and has arranged them in a

book, where the poems speak and sing to each other. When we open the book at random we will always find a poem by Meg facing a poem by Alistair, and when we close it again the two poems will be pressed together within the book. Sometimes we can see in a situation, an idea or an image just why the two poems are matched with each other; in other cases the two voices addressing each other are justification enough. The poems are not placed with dull regularity, Meg on the left and Alistair on the right or the reverse, but the voices are permitted to interweave in a variety of patterns. So similar are these voices, in fact, that it is by no means easy to decide in any one case which of the two poems was written by which of the two poets – at least at first sight. Usually, if we read more closely and more attentively we can see the difference well enough, but this gentle playfulness in the arrangement of the poems invites us as readers to do just that: to read closely and attentively. And we will always be rewarded for that effort.

For the love in these poems extends beyond the two protagonists and comes out from the pages to embrace us all. “All the world loves a lover”, and we would be dull of heart if we did not respond to these poems with our own feelings of tenderness and affection.

But don’t misunderstand me here: tenderness and affection are only two of many dimensions to be found in the love celebrated here. There is harshness and darkness as well. But the tensions, the pain and the negative feelings are all held within the bounds of an adult love. There are even hints of separation. For example, Meg’s poem, “Brown Peahen” begins:

*I ran away from you
into drenching night,
ducking under drooping branches
as the sky ran in runnels
down a mountain of pain.*

While Alistair’s poem on the opposite page, “Burning Rubbish” also uses the rain as an image of pain and also speaks of moving away from the beloved person. It begins:

*On this wild, wet Sunday morning
I am burning the week’s rubbish
In the oil drum by the red hut
Where the dogs graze in the spring grass
Under the ngaio tree.*

It speaks of a flock of doves fading and vanishing “beautiful as our love”, and the poet would prefer to believe the voice of a thrush asserting “that there is room / in this world for the two of us”, and yet the negative signs seem more powerful:

*But the wind is more persuasive,
And not even the rain can douse
The flames that are consuming
Our dreams with the week’s rubbish.*

Clearly this love is by no means a simple matter. And why should we even suppose that married love, sustained over fifty years would not include tension, pain,

misunderstanding and infidelity among its multiple dimensions? Another pair of poems – Meg’s “To a Young Friend” and Alistair’s “To a Young Girl” – speak of alternative lovers. Both of them end with regret and remorse and an acknowledgement that these alternatives could not replace the underlying love of the two for each other.

The fact that married love can be both joyful and troubled and, one might say, would be a lesser love if it did not have both of these aspects – this fact is not unique to the Campbell’s. Permit me to read a short passage from one of the great modern biographies, A.N. Wilson’s book on Tolstoy. I know that Alistair shares my admiration for this book. I take this passage to be something of a warning to anyone wanting to write the biography of a fifty-year marriage:

It is notoriously difficult to know the truth about a marriage. Marriage as a spectator sport is a gruesome business, besides which the gladiatorial excesses of ancient Rome seem innocent. ... People who are as closely entwined with one another as the Tolstoys, and involved in such a very long-term sexual relationship (remarkable in the extent of its passion and longevity) cannot often see the wood for the trees when they are describing their day-to-day, hour-by-hour existence. At one minute he might hate her, or she him. Another moment, while still hating, they might love each other distractedly. Like married couples who enjoy having rows at other people’s dinner tables, or on street corners, they would be almost certain if they read some of the later accounts of their marriage to yell at their well-wishers and supporters, ‘You keep out of this!’ before returning to the enjoyable task of destroying one another.

Wilson also points out that many of these so-called “supporters and well-wisher’s” have taken the wife’s part, and then adds, “The old man, however, has a distinguished supporter’s club, particularly, for some reason, among the English.” In short, we would be mistaken to believe that pain and trouble are evidence of an absence of love. Love might very well be something smaller without them.

Those of us who have been privileged to witness the long-lived love of Alistair and Meg Campbell can – most of us – not restrain ourselves from loving both of them as well. Something like that is likely to happen to this book, I believe. Its expressions of love will draw other lovers to it – I hesitate to say like moths to a flame.

In any case I am convinced that we are witnessing the birth of a book which is remarkable, beautiful and unique. Those responsible for its production – in particular Mark Pirie and Margaret Blair – have done the special qualities of its contents justice. It is a pleasure to hold this book in one’s hands, and it is a special pleasure to read it, whether at random or from cover to cover.

In launching this book, “*It’s Love, Isn’t It: The Love Poems of Alistair Te Ariki Campbell and Meg Campbell*”, I wish it much success, and I hope it will find many lovers on its passage through the world.