

Edgar Guest: Remembering 'The People's Poet'

Poetry is not my strong suit, I'm no good at writing verse.

My prose may be no better, but at least I could do worse.

Oh my gosh, I'm a poet and don't know it!

If it hadn't been for a couple good English teachers in high school, I might have never read more than a poem or two. My favorites as a teenager were "The Face on the Barroom Floor," adapted in 1887 by Hugh Antoine d'Arcy from an earlier poem by John Henry Titus; and "Casey at the Bat" by Ernest Lawrence Thayer. Except for those two classics, I thought poetry was what you do if you cannot otherwise express yourself in plain, clear language.

My appreciation for poetry, though still rudimentary, has advanced since those days. When I stumbled recently upon the work of [Edgar Guest](#) (1881–1959), I realized I've probably missed out on a lot of good verse over the years. I made up for some lost time by reading his "Poems of Patriotism," originally published in 1918 under the war-time title, "Over Here." I found it delightful and inspiring, as did millions of people who enjoyed Guest's popular poems in the first half of the last century.

Guest was born in Birmingham, England in 1881 but moved with his family a decade later to Detroit, Michigan. He fell in love with this adopted state and country and never left either. His first of about 11,000 poems appeared in the Detroit Free Press in 1898. More than 300 newspapers across the country regularly published his work. He earned the title, "The People's Poet," long before he died, well-known and much-loved, at the age of 77 in 1959.

Here's one of his poems I especially like, titled "The Time for Deeds." I believe it is even more fitting for our time than it was in his, a full century ago, and you don't have to be an American to appreciate its message:

We have boasted our courage in moments of ease,
Our star-spangled banner we've flung on the breeze;
We have taught men to cheer for its beauty and worth,
And have called it the flag of the bravest on earth.
Now the dark days are here, we must stand to the test.
Oh, God! Let us prove we are true to our best!
We have drunk to our flag, and we've talked of the right,
We have challenged oppression to show us its might;
We have strutted for years through the world as a race
That for God and for country, earth's tyrants would face;
Now the gage is flung down, hate is loosed in the world.
Oh, God! Shall our flag in dishonor be furled?
We have said we are brave; we have preached of the truth,
We have walked in the conceit of the strength of our youth;
We have mocked at the ramparts and guns of the foe,
As though we believed we could laugh them all low.
Now oppression has struck! We are challenged to fight!
Oh, God! Let us prove we can stand for the right!
If in honor and glory our flag is to wave,

If we are to keep this the land of the brave;
If more than fine words are to fashion our creeds,
Now must our hands and our hearts turn to deeds.
We are challenged by tyrants our strength to reveal!
Oh God! Let us prove that our courage is real!

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