

**THE SPIRIT OF MATILDA****CONSTANCE HERBERT**

In memory of Mary Doherty, 1898 - 1987

The children all were growing up  
(the last had just left school)  
but money still was needed,  
so to add some to the pool  
she packed her swag – at fifty-six –  
then headed for the track  
and became a unique legend  
in the shearing sheds outback

Still small, petite and lady-like  
despite hardship and sadness,  
despite her fourteen pregnancies,  
their sorrows and their gladness;  
with bright young dreams unrealised  
crushed by the Great Depression  
her spirit still held fast the hope  
that they would find expression  
some day, somehow, among the ranks  
of eleven still surviving;  
that in the end there had to be  
rewards for all the striving.  
Some day she'd have that lovely home  
with goldfish ponds and trees  
and garden beds a-blooming  
spreading fragrance on the breeze.  
Some day there'd be a grand lounge suite,  
a graceful velvet curtain,  
a dinner-service edged with gold:  
of that she felt quite certain.  
If she could take the rugged life,  
the searing heat, the flies,  
the endless stench of ovine waste

and daily dust-filled eyes-  
 If she could cope with all of that  
 and still come smiling through it  
 then she would reach her goal at last:  
 “Just one more shed should do it.”  
 But like the mystic min-min light  
 her goals would blaze then fade.  
 So “One more shed will see me through;  
 I’ll be right when I get paid.”  
 With swag for over twenty years  
 she travelled with the teams  
 thro’ drought, thro’ bushfires and thro’ floods  
 and held fast to her dreams.

In an 8-stand shed – at seventy eight  
 in Jerramungup town  
 Mary drew her last big cheque  
 and laid her chopper down.  
 “There’s no more killers now to cut,  
 there’s no more bread to bake,  
 so gather round the table, boys,  
 and eat my boiled fruit cake.”  
 Now in the West when shearers old  
 their glory days recalling,  
 the name of Mary Doherty  
 from dry old lips keeps falling.  
 They talk of how she cared for them  
 (and kept them in their places)  
 of how she didn’t take a drink –  
 but ‘fluttered’ on the races.  
 They talk about her aprons white  
 each daily starched and pressed-  
 “No worries, mate” you’ll hear them say,  
 “Miz’ Doherty was the best”.

They're over now, those days, those times  
and she has gone to rest,  
that very special shearers' cook  
who once traversed the West.

No National honours came her way  
no shields or medals won  
no official recognition  
of a vital job well done.

No cash rewards or accolades  
no ribbons to adorn,  
but Australia is much richer  
than had Mary not been born.

For Mary was a battler true  
a stalwart family builder  
who best embodied all that's meant  
by "The Spirit of Matilda."