

IOWA HISTORY

Prison Poet Predicts His End

*Above, Beyond
The sun-kissed walls reflect their borrowed light;
Beyond them is the world;
Above, the skies.*

*The sun-kissed walls
Are things of awful might;
I may but look beyond, above
With eyes that fill with tears.*

The poet who wrote those words knew quite a bit about walls and could only dream about the world beyond them. The poem was published in *The Reformatory Press*, the prison newspaper at the penitentiary in Fort Madison, in 1910. The author and Cedar Falls native, James Gordon Stell, had a reputation as a brilliant writer. He was known as the “Prison Poet.” In addition to contributing poems to the prison newspaper, Stell and another prisoner named John Null published a book titled *Convict Verse*. And the *Des Moines Register and Leader* devoted four columns of one of its Sunday issues to poetry by Stell.

Stell worked in the tool making department at Fort Madison and played on the baseball team called the Orchestra. He was known as a model prisoner and attended Sunday school at the prison chapel most weeks. One Sunday after church services Stell stayed behind to clean the chapel. No one knew what possessed him, but the Prison Poet broke into the nearby photography room and stole what he thought was grain alcohol. It turned out to be denatured wood alcohol, and Stell died as a result of ingesting the liquid.

Some people thought it was suicide. Stell had tried repeatedly to gain parole. It’s unclear what his crime was, but Stell himself believed he had paid his debt to society. “I have been here over four years—a greater crime than I committed to come here!” he wrote from his prison cell.

During those years the Prison Poet had plenty of time to think about life and death, and it was natural for him to put his thoughts into verse. One of his poems expressed thoughts about his final resting place—and it accurately predicted the prisoner’s ultimate circumstances. When he died his family refused to claim his body, and he was given a prison burial—no marble above his head.

*Graceless
To lie in a convict graveyard,
To mix with the graceless dead—*

*No word of glory near me?
No marble above my head?*

*But there is the earth around me,
The arch of the sky above,
And how can a sculptured marble
Be sign of a greater love?*

*I smile at your words of pity,
For what is a stone to one
Asleep in the breast of nature
With all of his toiling done?*

Sources

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