

# DAME MARY GILMORE NEARS 90TH BIRTHDAY

By A STAFF  
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DAME Mary Gilmore, Australia's most notable woman poet, who will be 90 on August 16, was in reminiscent mood yesterday afternoon when she received a gathering of Press representatives in her flat in Darlinghurst Road, King's Cross.

Although she has only lately recovered from a major operation, she looked a remarkably young almost-90, and — with occasional apologies for dominating the conversation — talked almost continuously for one and a half hours.

Most of what she said was not for public consumption — "not till I'm gone" — but her voice was firm and assured as she ranged from subject to subject, always with an entertaining anecdote to enforce a point.

Had she not been a singer of some note in her earlier days? Yes, her voice had been "remarkable" — it had been said that she might become another Jenny Lind. "Another Melba, you'd say to-day," she added reflectively. "Times change."

## Paraguay Venture

She had had the voice, yes; but her lungs would not stand the strain. She had been "given up" three times in her life because of tuberculosis, she recalled. "Well, almost given up . . ." and she paused eloquently.

Australians, she said firmly, should cultivate more intensely a sense of their own history.

There were still, she pointed out, descendants of many famous Europeans in Australia — the French family of de Guise, for instance.

Or even a man who could trace his family directly back to Colonel Blood, who stole the Crown jewels from the Tower of London in the reign of Charles I.

She had, of course, much to say of her own early days, when as a pupil teacher she had to contribute to newspapers under a variety of pseudonyms.

"Otherwise I would have been sacked," she said. "You weren't allowed to write for newspapers in those days if you were a teacher."

But she "couldn't help writing,"

although she admitted she had been impressed by the saying of — "who was that horse-faced woman who wrote 'The Mill on the Floss'?" George Eliot, yes.

"She said she wouldn't write till she was 30 because she thought she should first have a mature mind."

And then there was Paraguay, where she had lived for five years with the ill-fated "New Australia" movement led by William Lane.

The members of the colony had built the first cricket oval in Paraguay; the first corrugated iron tank; the first chimney, and the first fireplace.

It was the rule in Paraguay in those days that everyone had to plant at least three citrus trees — it didn't matter where.

There were oranges everywhere; you could buy 500 of them for "what we would call half-a-crown."

Australian literature to-day — was it not expanding?

"Expanding, yes — but not deepening. There's the money in it, but not the depth."

There were very big editions of books in her early days, she emphasised; but that was because "there were not the distractions then. And people were crazy for education."

## Life Story

Dame Mary talked on, the tips of her fingers pressed judiciously together, her face breaking occasionally into a reflective smile, her memory failing her less often than many a person half her age. When it did, she struck her hand sharply on the arm of her chair; and the elusive name or detail would, as often as not, return.

Previously, she said, she had firmly refused to allow anyone to write her biography; but lately — she left it to be inferred — she had changed her mind.

Well, partly. What she had been doing for some weeks past was to dictate the story of her own life to Mrs. Dorothy Catts,

who came to her bedroom every morning and took it all down on a typewriter.

Mrs. Catts smiled and nodded. "It's nearly finished," she said.

And Dame Mary is looking forward to a reception to be held on her 90th birthday at the Rural Bank, under the auspices of the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the Australasian Book Society.

Her toast will be proposed by Dr. H. V. Evatt, and a resume of her life, written by Helen Palmer, will be read by Leonard Thiele. Guests will include 150 Australians from all walks of life.